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ECO-COSMOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

We are earthlings, you and I. This sacred planet is our home and our heritage, our past and our future. Seen from a cosmic perspective, the differences among us are minor in comparison to our identity as an earth species. We bear the unmistakable imprint of the earth's evolution and are profoundly woven into its future.

Seen in a sacred manner, the earth is a biospiritual being. The spirituality of this planet distinguishes it from all other planets in the universe, uniting in its oneness the spiritualities of diverse wholes, from microorganisms to whales from cellular systems to ecosystems, from individuals to communities, from bioregions to the biosphere.

We humans have realized our basic ecospirituality through diverse cultures and in many ways. And yet, now, when we stand in need of fulfilling it on a global level, we find ourselves blocked on all sides by our own destructive processes and confused as to what might constitute a common functional spirituality. We need the power and vision available in our cultural heritage as well as in the cosmic-earth process to come to maturity as a species and join the earth community.

It is time we stop strutting about as if all spiritual life in the universe were somehow concentrated in our species alone. It is time to recognize that the roots of our spiritualities and religions go back to the great fireball and have wondrously manifested themselves on all the branches of the cosmic tree.

Thomas Berry in his article on the cosmology of religions explores some of the deeper implications of our new vision of the universe for the ecological reform of the world's religions. The fact that these religions have responded so slowly to the earth crisis reflects both their origins in another "universe" and their anthropocentric tendencies. Yet their wisdom and influence are important if the spirituality of the earth is not to be destroyed and therewith their own unfolding.

-- Don St. John

NOTE: Please send in your contributions for our "Reader's Forum" issue by May 31, 1989 (see page 9).

THE COSMOLOGY OF RELIGIONS
by Thomas Berry

The universe itself is the primary sacred community. All human religion should be considered as participation in the religious aspect of the universe itself. We are moving from the theology of religions and the anthropology of religions to the cosmology of religions. Especially in the past fifty years in America there has been intensive interest in the sociology of religions and the psychology of religions, but even more interest in the history of religions. All of these fall within the general designation of the anthropology of religions.

Because none of these have been able to deal effectively with the evolutionary story of the universe or with the ecological crisis that is disturbing the earth in all its basic life systems we are being led on to the cosmological dimension of the religious issue both from our efforts at academic understanding and from the practical issues of survival.

What is new about this sense of the religious mode of being of the universe is that the universe itself is now experienced as an irreversible time-developmental process not simply as an abiding seasonal renewing universe. Not so much cosmos as cosmogenesis.

Also our knowledge of the universe is primarily through our empirical observational sciences rather than through intuitive processes. We are listening to the cosmos tell its story through the signals that it sends to us from outer space, through the light that comes to us from the stars, through the geological formations of the earth, and through a vast number of evidences of itself that the universe and its various components manifest to us.

In its every aspect the human is a participatory reality. We are members of the great universe community. We participate in its life. We are nourished

by this community, we are instructed by this community, we are healed by this community. In and through this community we enter into communion with that numinous mystery whence all things depend for their existence and their activity. If this is true for the universe entire, it is also true in our relations with the earth.

From its evidences we now know the story of the universe as emergent process in its fourfold sequence; the galactic story, the earth story, the life story, the human story. These constitute for us the primordial sacred story of the universe.

The original flaring forth of the universe carried the present within its fantastic energies as the present expresses those original energies in their articulated form. This includes all those spiritual developments that have occurred in the course of the centuries. The universe in its sequence of transformations carries within itself the comprehensive meaning of the phenomenal world. In recent secular times this meaning was perceived only in its physical expression. Now we perceive that the universe is a spiritual as well as a physical reality from the beginning.

This sacred dimension is especially evident in those stupendous moments of transformation through which the universe has passed in these fifteen billion years of its existence. These are moments of great spiritual as well as great physical significance; the privileged moments in the Great Story. The numinous mystery of the universe now reveals itself in a developmental mode of expression, a mode never before available to human consciousness through observational processes.

Yet all this has seldom meant much to our modern theologians. We remain concerned with scriptural interpretation, spiritual disciplines, social justice programs, liturgy, the history of Christianity, inter-religious dialogue, religion and science, psychology of religion, and religious pedagogy; studies with little concern for the natural world as the primary bearer of religious consciousness. This is

one of the basic reasons why both the physical and spiritual survival of the planet earth have become imperilled.

Presently we in the West think of ourselves as passing into another historical period or undergoing another cultural modification, a continuation of the long series of historical transformation that have taken place in the past and which are continuing on into the future. This is quite understandable. If we think, however, that the changes taking place in our times are simply another in the series of transformations that passes from the classical-mediterranean period through the medieval to the industrial and modern periods we are missing the real order of magnitude of the changes taking place. We are the end of an entire religious-civilizational period. In virtue of our new knowledge we are changing our most basic relations to the world about us. These changes are of a unique order of magnitude.

Our new acquaintance with the universe as irreversible developmental process can be considered as the most significant religious and spiritual as well as the most significant scientific event since the beginning of the more complex civilizations some five thousand years ago. At the same time we are bringing about the greatest devastation that the planet earth has ever experienced in the four and half billion years of its formation.

This is a remarkable statement. We are changing the chemistry of the planet, we are disturbing the biosystems, we are altering the geological structure and functioning of the planet, all of which took some hundreds of millions and even billions of years to bring into being. In this process of closing down the life systems of the planet we are in fact devastating a sacred world, making of the earth a wasteland, little realizing, evidently, that as we lose the more gorgeous species of life on earth we thereby lose modes of divine presence, the very basis of our religious experience.

Because we are unable to enter effectively into the new mystique of the emergent universe available to us through our new modes of understanding we are unable to prevent the disintegration of the life systems of the planet taking place through the misuse of that same scientific vision. Western religion and theology have not yet addressed these issues or established their identity in this context. Nor have other religious traditions been any more successful. The main religious traditions have simply restated their belief and their spiritual disciplines in a kind of fundamentalist pattern. What I have indicated as our new experience of the religious being of the universe and of the planet earth is not perceived on any widespread scale within academic theological or religious circles.

We cannot, it seems to me, resolve the difficulties we face in this new situation by setting aside the entire scientific venture that has been in process over these past two centuries, especially during this twentieth century. It will not go away. Nor can we assume an attitude of indifference toward this new context of earthly existence. It is too powerful in its total effects. We must, it seems to me, find a way of interpreting the process itself. If interpreted properly, the scientific venture may even be one of the most significant spiritual disciplines of these times. This task is particularly urgent just now since this new mode of understanding is so powerful in its consequences on the very structure of the planet earth. We must learn to respond to its deepest spiritual content or else submit to the devastation that is before us.

I do not consider that fundamentalist assertions of our former traditions can themselves bring these forces under control. We are not engaged simply in academic inquiry. We are involved in the future of the planet in its geological and biological survival and functioning as well as in the future of our human and spiritual well-being. We will bring about a physical and spiritual well-being of the planet entire or there will be neither physical nor

spiritual well-being for any of our earthly forms of being.

The traditional religions have not dealt effectively with these issues or with our modern cosmological experience because they were not designed for such a universe. Traditional religions have been shaped within a dominant spatial mode of consciousness. The biblical religions, although they have a historical developmental perspective in dealing with the human spiritual process, have themselves a dominant spatial mode of consciousness as regards the universe itself. Biblical religions provide for the progress of the divine kingdom within an established universe that participates in the historical process in only a marginal manner. They seem to have as much difficulty as any other tradition in dealing with the developmental character of the universe.

Although the antagonism toward an evolutionary universe has significantly diminished, our limitations as theologians in speaking the language of this new cosmology in our religious understanding is everywhere evident. If much has been done in Process Theology in terms of our conceptions of the divine and the relations of the divine to the phenomenal world, this has been done generally in the realm of systematic theology. Little has been done in the empirical study of the cosmos itself as religious expression.

To envisage the universe in its religious dimension requires that we speak of the religious aspect of the original flaming forth of the universe, the religious role of the elements, the religious functioning of the earth and all its components. Since the human in its religious capacities emerges out of this cosmological process then the universe itself can be considered as the primary bearer of the religious experience.

This way of thinking about the emergent universe provides a context for the future development of all the various traditions. Indeed all the various peoples of the world insofar as they are being educated in a

modern context, are coming to identify themselves in time and space in terms of the universe as this is presently described by our modern sciences, even though they are not learning the more profound spiritual and religious meaning that is indicated by this new sense of the universe.

The story of the universe is at one time scientific, mythic, and mystical. Most elaborate in its scientific statement, it is among the simplest of creation stories. Most of all it is the story that the universe tells about itself. We are finally overcoming our isolation from the universe and beginning to listen to the universe in some depth. If until recently we were autistic in relation to its more spiritual communication this is no longer entirely true. In this understanding we have an additional context for religious understanding for all the traditions, much as our more recent cosmologies do not negate but add to the Newtonian world view and enable us to deal with questions that cannot be dealt with in the Newtonian context. So now we have additional depths of spiritual understanding through our listening to the universe that were not available through our traditional insights. Just as we can no longer live simply within the physical universe of Newton we can no longer live spiritually within the limits of our earlier traditions.

The first great contribution this new perspective on the universe makes to religious consciousness is the sense of participating in the creation process itself. We bear within us the impress of every transformation through which the universe and the planet earth have passed. The elements out of which we are composed were shaped in the supernova implosions. We passed through the period of stardust dispersion resulting from this implosion-explosion of the first generation of stars. We were integral with the attractive forces that brought those particles together in the original shaping of the earth. Especially in the rounded form of the planet we felt the gathering of the components of the earthly community and experienced the self-organizing

spontaneities within the megamolecules out of which came the earliest manifestations of the life process and the transition to cellular and organic living forms. These same forces that brought forth the genetic codings of all the various species were guiding the movement of life on toward its latest expression in human consciousness.

This journey, considered as the sacred journey of the universe, is the personal journey of each individual. We cannot but marvel at this amazing sequence of transformations. No other creation story is more fantastic in its account of how things came to be in the beginning and how they came to be as they are, or how each of us attained the special determinations that give to us our personal identity. That we have the reflexive consciousness to appreciate and to celebrate this story is the superb aspect of our present period of history. The universe is the larger self of each person since the entire sequence of events that has transpired since the beginning of the universe has been required to establish each of us in the precise structure of our own being and in the larger community context in which we function.

Earlier periods and traditions have also experienced their intimacy with the universe, especially in those moments of cosmic renewal that took place periodically, mostly in the springtime of the year. Through these grand rituals powerful energies flowed into the world. Yet it was the renewal of the world or the sustaining of an abiding universe, not the irreversible and non-repeatable original emergence of the world that was taking place. Only an irreversible self-organizing world such as that in which we live could provide this special mode of participation in the emergent creation itself. This irreversible sequence of transformations is taking shape through our own activities as well as through the activities of the multitude of component members of the universe community.

Yet not a straight line sequence, since the component elements of the universe move in pulsations, in sequences of integration-disintegration, in spiral or

circular patterns, especially on earth in seasonal expressions of life renewal. On earth especially the basic tendencies of the universe seem to explode in an overwhelming display of geological, biological and human modes of expression, from the tiniest particles of matter and their movement to the shaping and the vast movements of the seas and continents, with the clash and rifting of tectonic plates, the immense hydrological cycles, the spinning of the earth on its own axis, its circling of the sun and the bursting forth of the millionfold variety of living forms.

Throughout this confused, disorderly, even chaotic process, we witness an enormous creativity. The quintessence of this great journey of the universe is the balance between equilibrium and disequilibrium. Although so much of the disequilibrium fails in its reaching toward a new and greater integration, the only way to consistent creativity is through the breakdown of existing unities. That disturbed periods of history are the creative periods can be seen in the dark ages of Europe as well as in the period of breakdown in imperial order in China at the end of the Han period around the year 200 AD.

So too religiously, the grand creativity is found in the stressful moments. It was in a period of spiritual confusion that Buddha appeared to establish a new spiritual discipline. The prophets appeared in the disastrous moments of Israel. Christianity established itself in the social and religious unsettlement of the late Roman period. So now we find ourselves in the greatest period of disturbance that the earth has ever known, a period when both the human and the natural worlds are severely threatened in their continued existence. The identity of our human fate with the destinies of the planet itself was never more clear.

This new context of thinking also establishes a new context for liturgy. Presently our liturgies give magnificent expression to the periods of seasonal renewal. Also, at times, to significant historical events or personal achievements.

Especially in these moments of renewal, in the springtime of the year, the psychic energies of the human community are renewed in their deepest sources by their participation in the deep changes within the natural world itself.

But now a new sequence of liturgical celebrations is needed, celebrations based on those stupendous moments when the great cosmological transformations took place. Even more than the great moments of seasonal renewal these moments of cosmic transformation must be considered as sacred moments. Only by a proper celebration of these moments can our own human spiritual development take place in an integral manner. Indeed these were the decisive moments in the shaping of human consciousness as well as in the shaping of our physical being.

First among these celebrations might be that of the emergent moment of the universe itself as a spiritual as well as a physical event. This was the beginning of religion just as it was the beginning of the world. The human mind and all its spiritual capacities began with this first shaping of what was to become the universe as we know it. As with origin moments generally this moment is a supremely sacred moment carrying within it the high destinies of the universe in its intellectual and spiritual capacities as well as its physical shaping and living expression.

Of special import at this time is the rate of emergence of the universe and the curvature of space whereby all things hold together. The rate of emergence in those first instants had to be precise to the hundred billionth of a fraction. Otherwise the universe would have exploded or collapsed. The rate of emergence was such that the consequent curvature of the universe was sufficiently closed to hold the universe together within its gravitational bondings and yet open enough so that the creative process could continue through these billions of years and provide the guidance and the energies we need as we move through the dangers of the present on into a

more creative if not into a more secure future.

This bonding of the universe whereby every reality of the universe attracts and is attracted to every other being in the universe was the condition for the rise of human affection. It was the beginning and most comprehensive expression of the divine love that pervades the universe in its every aspect and enables the creative processes of the universe to continue.

It might be appropriate then if this beginning moment of the universe were designated as the context for religious celebration, even for a special liturgy available in the diversity of its expression to all the peoples of the planet as they begin to sense their identity in time and space in terms of the evolutionary story of the universe.

A long list of other transformation moments might be selected for celebration since these moments establish both the spiritual and the physical contours for further development of the entire world. At first it seems difficult to appreciate that these moments are supreme spiritual moments, we are so accustomed to thinking of the universe either in purely physical terms or in ancient mythic modes of expression.

Among these supreme moments of transformation we might list the supernova explosions that took place as the first generation of stars collapsed into themselves in some trillions of degrees of heat, sufficient to bring into existence the heavier elements out of the original hydrogen and helium atoms, and then exploded into the stardust with which our own solar system and the planet earth shaped themselves. This entire process can be considered as a decisive spiritual moment as well as a decisive physical moment in the story of the universe. New levels of subjectivity came into being, new modalities of bonding, new possibilities for those inner spontaneities whereby the universe carries out its capacities for self-organization. Along with all this came the magnificent array of differentiated

elements with the capacity for all the intricate associations that now became possible. Indeed the earth as we know it, in all its spiritual as well as its physical aspects, became a possibility.

To ritualize this moment would provide that depth of appreciation for ourselves and for the entire creative process that is needed just now when the entire earthly process has become trivialized and we have no established way of entering into the spiritual dimension of the story that the universe is telling us about itself and the shaping of the earth and of all living beings and finally of ourselves.

The human is precisely that being in whom this total process reflects on and celebrates itself and its numinous origins in a special mode of conscious self-awareness. At our highest moments we fulfill this role through the association of our liturgies with the supreme liturgy of the universe itself. Awareness that the universe itself is the primary liturgy has been recognized by the human community since the earliest times of which we have information. The human personality as well as the various types of human communities have always sought to insert themselves into space and time through this integration with the great movement of the heavens and the cycles of the seasons seen as celebratory events with profound numinous significance. What is needed now is integration with a new sequence of liturgies related to the irreversible transformation sequence whereby the world as we know it has come into being.

So we could go through the entire range of events whereby the universe took shape and inquire not simply into the physical reality but the religious meaning and direction of the entire process. A great many of the mysteries of the earth could be celebrated. The invention of photosynthesis is especially important in this context. Then the coming of the trees and later the coming of the flowers one hundred million years ago. Just how we would celebrate the birthday of the human species is a challenge beyond all our previous considerations.

Only such a selective sequence of religious celebrations could enable the cosmology of religions to come into being. If the sacred history of the biblical world is recounted with such reverence, how much more the recounting of the sacred history of the universe and of the planet earth. In all of this we can observe the continuity of the human religious process with the emergent process of the universe itself, with the shaping of the planet earth, with the emergence of life and the appearance of the human.

We find this difficult because we are not accustomed to think of ourselves as integral with or subject to the universe, to the planet earth, or to the community of living beings; especially not in our religious or spiritual lives which identify the sacred precisely as that which is atemporal and unchanging. We think of ourselves as the primary referent and the universe as participatory in our own achievements. Only the present threats to the viability of the human as a species and to the life systems of the earth are finally causing us to reconsider our situation.

This leads us to a final question in our consideration of the various religious traditions, the question of the religious role of the human as species. History is being made now in every aspect of the human endeavor not within or between nations, or ethnic groups, or cultures; but between humans as species and the larger earth community. We have been too concerned with ourselves as nations, ethnic groups, cultures, religions. We are presently in need of a species and inter-species orientation in law, economics, politics, education, medicine, religions, and whatever else concerns the human.

If until recently we could be unconcerned with the species level of human activities, this is no longer the situation. We need now not a national or international economy or even a global economy; we need a species economy, an economy that will relate the human as species to the community of species on the planet, an economy that will ultimately be

an integral earth economy. Already this is beginning in the awareness that the human is overwhelming the entire productivity of the earth with its excessive demands. The human is using up some forty percent of the entire productivity of the earth. This leaves an inadequate resource base for the larger community of life. The cycle of renewal is overburdened to such an extent that even the renewable life systems are being extinguished.

We could in a corresponding manner outline the need for a species, an inter-species, and even a planetary legal system as the only viable system that can be functionally effective in the present situation. We could say the same thing as regards medicine. The issue of species health has come into view and beyond that the health of the planet. Human health on a toxic planet is a contradiction. Yet we are, apparently, trying to achieve just that. The primary objective of the medical profession must be to foster the integral health of the earth itself. Only afterwards can human health be adequately attended to.

In each of these cases, in economics, law, medicine, the planet itself constitutes the normative reference. There already exists a planetary economics. The proper role of the human is to foster the economics of the earth and to see that our human economics functions in relation to and subordinate to the planetary economy. The same thing could be said for the realms of law and governance. There exists a comprehensive participatory governance of the planet. Every member of the earth community rules and is ruled by other members of the community as a whole and its individual members have prospered remarkably well over the centuries and even the millennia. The proper role for the human is to articulate its own governance within this planetary governance.

What we have not discussed so extensively has been a religion of the human as species. This is an extremely difficult idea to articulate clearly. This concept implies a prior sense of the religious dimension of the natural world. If the

earth is an economic mode of being as well as a biological mode of being then it might not be too difficult to think of the earth as having a religious mode of being. This seems to be explicit in many of the scriptures of the world although this concept is yet to be articulated effectively in the context of our present understanding of the great story of the universe. In general we think of the earth as joining in the religious expression of the human rather than the human joining in the religious expression of the earth. This has been the difficulty in most spheres of activity. We consistently think of the human as primary and the earth as derivative rather than thinking of the earth as primary and the human as derivative.

Our best model for this new vision within the context of a spatial model of consciousness is probably found in the classical traditions of China. So far within the perspective of a time-developmental mode of consciousness there is as yet no model.

This essay will appear in Theology in World Perspective (The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society 1988), Paul Knitter, ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).

Thomas Berry is the Director of the Riverdale Center in New York City. His most recent work, The Dream of the Earth (Sierra Club, 1988), is highly recommended to our readers.

READER'S FORUM

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND IN YOUR POETRY, REFLECTIONS, BOOK SUGGESTIONS, ETC., FOR THE SUMMER ISSUE. WE HAVE DECIDED TO EXPAND IT SLIGHTLY FROM OUR EARLIER FOCUS ON BOOK REVIEWS AND SUGGESTIONS ONLY. WHILE WE MAY HAVE TO DO SOME EDITING, WE WILL TRY TO PRINT ALL THAT WE RECEIVE.

WE APPRECIATE YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT OF "ECOSPIRIT" AND WILL TRY TO PRESENT THE BEST THINKING AVAILABLE ON THE ISSUES OF ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY AND REFLECTION. YOUR RESPONSE TO ARTICLES IS INVITED.

FOR LEHIGH VALLEY READERS:
PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENT

On Wednesday, April 12, at 8:00 p.m., the Godfrey Daniels Poetry Series and the Institute for Ecosophical Studies will present "An Evening of Eco-Poetry," featuring poets Walt Franklin and Jean Pearson. The event will be held at Godfrey Daniels Coffee House, 7 E. 4th St., Bethlehem.

Franklin, a writer and environmentalist from Greenwood, New York, is editor and publisher of Great Elm Press, an independent small press dedicated to writing about rural affairs and bio-regional poetry. He is the author of eight volumes of poems. Franklin has been active in efforts to sustain the diversity, stability, and integrity of natural areas near the New York-Pennsylvania border. E.J. Reilly has observed that "Franklin's writing has many of the fine attributes of D.H. Lawrence's poetry--a deep, real and visceral empathy with nature and the living organisms of this magnificent planet."

Born and rooted in Bethlehem, Pa., Jean Pearson is an animal rights and wilderness advocate. Her poems have appeared in The American Poetry Review, Milkweed Chronicle, Animal's Agenda, Earth First!, and Organic Gardening. In 1985 she edited the special "Earth" issue of the Walt Whitman Association's literary journal, Mickle Street Review. Ms. Pearson has co-authored a Swedish history of women in literature, published more than forty essays on women authors in various reference works and received high acclaim for her translations of nature poetry by German and Swedish poets. Pearson's chapbook of poems, On Speaking Terms with Earth, appeared in 1988 with Great Elm Press. Her poems reflect an "I-Thou" attitude of equality between species and reflect her philosophy that every life is unique and all life is sacred. Jean is also on the Board of Directors of The Institute for Ecosophical Studies as well as a co-founder.

Admission is \$3.50. More Info? Call Godfrey Daniels, 8672390 or Don St. John, 865-2493.

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