

The Lens Through Which We See

The New Cosmology and the Sacredness of the Earth

By Joseph Mitchell, C.P.

Shockwaves rippled through Europe in 1543 when Copernicus suggested that the Earth was neither stationary nor the center of the world. “What! We’re revolving around the sun and spinning through space?” They were disoriented because this view of reality challenged their cosmology.

A cosmology is the concept a culture embraces to explain the way things are – how the universe came into being, how the cosmos operates. It is a cultural assumption about the nature of the world and our place as humans within it.

The dominant cosmology of the past 300 years came from Isaac Newton. He portrayed the world as a “clockwork universe.” Newton’s model of 1687 depicted a clock wound up by God at the beginning of time and now ticking along, like a perfect machine. It was a simple yet powerfully persuasive cosmology. To those captivated by the triumphs of the industrial revolution, it seemed sensible that the universe itself could be made of tiny atomic parts that, when properly put together, run like a gigantic machine.

The western world gradually recovered from the Copernican disruption of their worldview as they became captivated with Newton’s mechanistic metaphor. Humans began to think of themselves as essentially separate and superior to the natural world. It was merely the stage on which they lived their lives. They were convinced that the Earth was as lifeless and inert as any piece of machinery.

Understandably, the wondrous spirit of the creation evaporated. After all, there is no mystery to a machine. If a part breaks down, it can be removed, repaired and replaced. There is no spiritual dimension to a mechanism. Numinous qualities reside elsewhere in the domain of its divine maker. In a snapshot, this represents the modern worldview. It is our current prevailing western cosmology.

Nothing is more foundational to a society than its assumptions about the way things are. A cosmology is preliminary to everything else created by a society. Consequently, our understanding of the way the world operates shapes the way we educate our young, farm our lands, build our cities, govern our communities, organize our economies, articulate our religious beliefs, and understand what it means to be human. Every institution which a society envisions and constructs is based upon the worldview conveyed within its cosmology.

Today, we suffer from a crisis of cosmology. According to Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest and cultural historian, it would be simplistic to conclude that the devastation of the Earth is the result of selfishness or lack of goodwill. According to Berry, we face ecological uncertainty and psychic confusion not because human beings are inherently greedy or evil. Rather, the environmental crisis has been precipitated because humans are living out of inaccurate perceptions of reality shaped by their worldview. Our culture desperately needs a new cosmology if we are to survive.

The Newtonian cosmology underpinning our culture is plainly flawed. It is an outdated worldview which no longer holds up under scientific scrutiny. We are living through a radical cultural earthquake similar to the repercussions caused by Copernicus that set the Medieval world tumbling.

Over the past few decades we have been receiving information from the observational sciences which not only disputes previous assumptions about the nature of reality, but challenges the modern cosmology upon which our cultural institutions have been designed and within which our sense of

human identity has been formulated. Through new perceptions made possible by enhancements in the telescope and microscope, a momentous change in human consciousness is taking place.

According to what we are now able to observe, the world is not a mechanical system composed of separate parts. It is dynamic universe in which everything is fundamentally interrelated and interdependent. We are awakening to the remarkable and magnificent creativity of our planet as a living system.

The present environmental devastation is the consequence a Newtonian cosmology. It conditioned us to think of humans as separate from the natural world and made us autistic in our ability to relate with the Earth. We can ravage the planet that brought us into being and exhaust its capacity to carry life with our ravenous habits of consumption. We can contaminate the air, pollute the water, and exhaust the soil with vast amounts of toxic chemicals. We can destroy mountains, forests, and animal habitats to extract resources for fuel. We can deplete the oceans by over-fishing and foul the rivers with our garbage because our cosmology alienates us from the natural world which brought us into being.

Until quite recently we assumed humans were inserted into creation as an addendum. That perspective is now being shattered by discoveries that we emerged and evolved within the 4.5 billion year story of the Earth. We do not live on the Earth, as if it were only a backdrop for our personal dramas. We came out of the Earth. This did not go unnoticed by ancient sages as recorded in Genesis: “the Lord God formed humans out of the clay of the ground.”

It is simple ecological logic – you cannot separate the health of humans from the health of the environment. The entire human physical structure is composed of non-human materials that we ingest when we eat, drink and breathe. When the Earth becomes toxic, we become toxic. No matter how much we regulate our diet or intensify our exercise, it is impossible to be a healthy human on a sick planet.

The mechanistic concept of reality allowed us to develop cultural attitudes which, in light of new information, must be reevaluated. As a planet, we teeter on the edge of ecological catastrophe due, in large part, to over-consumption of natural resources and careless pollution of the environment. The food chain is being disrupted by manipulation and manufactured substances. Carbon stored within fossil fuels is briskly being released it into the atmosphere resulting in significant climate changes. The finely tuned balance that sustained the planet for billions of years is being disrupted within a few decades due to the blundering of one species – the human.

Our hope lies in recovering an intimacy with the Earth out of which we emerged. Its fate is our fate. It is a remarkable 13.8 billion year story which brought forth solar systems, red giant stars, hydrogen atoms, cumulus clouds, elephants, sunflowers and human beings.

Only when we conceptually abide within the new cosmology will we attain sufficient energy to change our damaging behavior and find the vision to build a hopeful future. The challenge is so see the Earth as a single sacred community.

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