

Human Image: World Image

The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology

BOOK INTRODUCTION

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One thing we no longer need to be told is that we are in the throes of a crisis of the most appalling dimensions. We tend to call this crisis the ecological crisis, and this is a fair description in so far as its effects are manifest in the ecological sphere. For here the message is quite clear: our entire way of life is humanly and environmentally suicidal, and unless we change it radically there is no way in which we can avoid catastrophe. Without such change the whole adventure of civilization will come to an end during the lifetime of many now living.

Unhappily we do not yet appear to have realized the urgency of the need for such a change, and in spite of everything we continue to blunder on along our present path of devastation in a kind of blindfold nightmare enacted with all the inevitability of a Greek tragedy, planning to extend our empire of sterilized artificiality and specialist methodology even further, advancing even further into the computerized or electronic wilderness, devising bigger banking systems, manipulating the natural reproductive processes of plants, animals and human beings, saturating our soils and crops with high-powered chemicals and a variety of poisons which no sane community would allow out of a closely-guarded laboratory, stripping the world of what is left of its forests at a speed which defies belief or understanding, and behaving generally in a manner which, even if we had deliberately programmed it, could not be more propitious to our own annihilation and to that of the world about us. It is as if we are in the grip of some monstrous collective psychosis, as if a huge death-wish hangs over the whole so-called civilized world.

In the ecological sphere the message is unambiguously clear. Yet although the effects of our contemporary crisis are most evident in this sphere, the crisis itself is not first of all an ecological crisis. It is first of all a crisis concerning the way we think. We are treating our planet in an inhuman and god-forsaken manner because we see things in an inhuman, god-forsaken way. And we see things in this way because that basically is how we see ourselves.

This is the first thing about which we have to be absolutely clear if we are even to begin to find a way out of the hells of self-mutilation to which we have condemned ourselves. How we see the world depends above all upon how we see ourselves.

Our model of the universe -- our world-picture or world-image -- is based upon the model we have of ourselves, upon our own self-image. When we look at the world, what we see is a reflection of our own mind, or our mode of consciousness. Our perception of a tree, a mountain, a face, an animal or a bird is a reflection of our idea of who we think we are.

This means that before we can effectively deal with the ecological problem, we have to change our world image, and this in its turn means that we have to change our self-image. Unless our own evaluation of ourselves, and of what constitutes the true nature of our being, changes, the way we treat the world about us will not change either. And unless this happens, conservation theory and practice, however well-intentioned, will not touch the heart of the problem. They will at best represent an effort to deal with what in the end are symptoms, not causes.

I do not want in the least to belittle such efforts, which often are heroic, lonely and incredible, against all odds. One of the terrible temptations we face is that of thinking that the problem is so big that nothing we can do on an individual scale can possibly have any effect: we must leave it to the authorities, to the governments, to the experts.

That is a fatal attitude. Every single gesture made, however pathetic it may seem, counts, and may have incalculable consequences. Thought not accompanied by corresponding practice soon becomes sterile. Yet at the same time practice springing from incorrectly based thought easily becomes counter-productive, because practice deals above all with symptoms. Causes are rooted in the way we think, and it is because of this that our crisis is first of all a question of our self-image and our world-view.

This is the crux of our situation. The industrial and technological inferno we have produced around us, and by means of which we are now devastating the world, is not something that has come about accidentally. On the contrary, it is the direct consequence of our allowing ourselves to be dominated by a certain paradigm of thought -- embracing a certain human image and a certain world image -- to such a degree that it now determines virtually all our mental attitudes and all our actions, public and private.

It is a paradigm of thought that impels us to look upon ourselves as little more than two-legged animals whose destiny can best be fulfilled through the pursuit of social, political and economic self-interest. To correspond with this self-image we have invented a

worldview in which nature is seen as an impersonal commodity, a soulless source of food, raw materials, wealth, power and so on, which we think we are quite entitled to experiment with, exploit, remodel and generally abuse by means of any scientific and mechanical technique we can devise, in order to satisfy and deploy this self-interest. Having in our own minds desanctified ourselves, we have desanctified nature too, in our own minds: we have removed it from the suzerainty of the divine, and that it is our thrall, subject to our will. In short, under the aegis of this self-image and world-view, we have succeeded in converting ourselves into the most depraved and depraving of all creatures upon the earth.

This self-image and worldview have their origin in a loss of memory, in a forgetfulness of who we are, and in our fall to a level of ignorance and stupidity that threatens the survival of our race. By an inescapable logic inherent in this origin we are impelled to proceed along a course each step of which is marked by our fall into ever deeper ignorance of our own nature and consequently into ever deeper ignorance of the nature of everything else as well.

So long as we persist in this course, we are doomed to advance blindly and at an ever-increasing pace toward total loss of identity, total loss of control and eventually to total self-destruction. And nothing can stop this process except a complete reversal of direction, a complete change in the way we look at ourselves and so in the way we look at the world about us. Without this change, we will simply continue to add fuel to our own funeral pyre.

Can we make this reversal, this complete change? I think the answer to that is that no one can stop us except ourselves.

The question -- the only real question -- is what self-image and world-view are we to put in the place of the bankrupt stereotypes, the unensouled fictions, which have taken us over?

Here a certain act of recollection is needed. I said that the self-image and world-view that now dominate us have their origin in a loss of memory, in our forgetfulness of who we are. What do I mean by this?

In the great cultures of the world, human beings do not regard themselves as two-legged animals, descended from the apes, whose needs and satisfactions can be achieved through pursuing social, political and economic self-interest in the material world. On the contrary, they think of themselves first as descended from God, or from the gods, and as heirs to eternity, a destiny that goes far beyond anything that can be fulfilled only in the material world. They think of themselves as sacred beings, even as semi-divine beings,

not in their own right, but because they are created in the divine image, in the image of God, of a transcendent more-than-human form of consciousness. They come from a divine source, and the divine world is their birthright, their true home.

In the same way, they do not look upon the world of nature as a mere chance association of atoms or as something impersonal, soulless, inanimate, which they are entitled to manipulate, master, exploit and generally to tamper and mess around with in order to gratify their greeds and power-lusts. They look upon nature as a divine creation, as full of a hidden wisdom as they themselves are. They sense that every part of the earth -- of the whole cosmos -- is sacred. Every leaf, every grain of sand or soil, every bird, animal and star, the air and every insect is holy. They may trade in the gifts they offer -- in precious stones and spices, in corn and cattle. They may in ignorance be excessive in their demands on them, in grazing their flocks or in felling too many trees. But they do not deliberately "trade in nature itself."

If nature is the creation of God, or the manifestation of Supreme Wisdom and Harmony, it follows not only that it is the expression of a divine order, but also that this order and disposition are the best that are possible, given the conditions within which nature is created. Consequently, for us to imagine that we can improve it, or remove the imperfections inherent in it, by interfering with it, re-modelling it, transforming it and so on, through ways that involve perverting its God-given order and disposition as well as the organic processes that are part and parcel of them, is sheer folly and impertinence: it is to imagine that we can outstrip and improve on the wisdom of Wisdom Absolute. Inevitably, any attempt on our part to interfere in it or to re-model it can only debase, canker and corrupt the conditions in which we have to live our life on earth. Over the last few centuries we have so effectively demonstrated the truth of this that we should not need any further convincing as to the rightness of the understanding in which it is rooted.

Yet in spite of this, such an understanding, and the sense of the sacredness of both man and nature, as well as the awe and reverence that they inspire, are often characterized nowadays as primitive, or as based on superstition.

And this in spite of the fact that -- to limit ourselves to the European tradition -- there is no major philosopher, from Plato to Berdyaev, and no major poet, from Homer to Yeats, who has not explicitly or implicitly affirmed the kind of cosmology that we now tend to ridicule, repudiate or ignore. One of the great unresolved psychological enigmas of the modern western world is the question of what or who has persuaded us to accept as axiomatic a self-view and worldview that demand that we reject the wisdom and vision of our major philosophers and poets in order to imprison our thought and our very selves in the materialist, mechanical and dogmatic torture-chamber devised by purely

quantitative scientific minds.

In this connection there is one particular fallacy from which we must free ourselves, and this is the idea that contemporary scientific theories are somehow neutral, or value-free, and do not presuppose the submission of the human mind to a set of assumptions or dogmas in the way that is demanded by a religious faith. This idea is still propagated and even believed by many modern scientists themselves. On it is based the claim that scientific descriptions of things are objective descriptions. It is not that these scientists deny that there are values. It is that in so far as they are scientists they claim to operate independently of value-judgements, and to be engaged in what they like to call purely disinterested scientific research.

This is one of the most insidious fallacies of which we still tend to be the victims. Even people who maintain that they are fighting for a new philosophy of ecological values repeat it as though it were beyond dispute. In fact, far from being beyond dispute, it represents a total lie. Every thought, every observation, every judgement, every description of the modern scientist or of anyone else is soaked in "a priori" preconceived built-in value judgements, assumptions and dogmas as rigid, if not more rigid (because they are so often unconsciously embraced), than those of any explicitly religious system. The very nature of human thought is such that it cannot operate independently of value-judgements, assumptions and dogmas.

Alongside this fallacy, and closely allied with it, is another fallacy of which we still tend to be the victims. This is the notion that modern science is valid in relation to that limited aspect of things -- namely, that aspect which is material or phenomenal, and extended in time and space -- that it sets out to study. This notion involves the claim that there are two levels of reality; that each level can be studied apart from, and without reference to, the other; and that the knowledge gained as a result of studying the one level is just as valid as the knowledge gained as a result of studying the other level.

This way of envisaging things is a fallacy because the primary determinant of the knowledge that we form of things is not the particular level of reality to which this knowledge is said to apply.

There are not two sciences, one concerned with the material and the other with the spiritual and eternal dimension. There is only one science. But there are two dominant modes of consciousness in man: his ego-consciousness, which is his lowest mode of consciousness, and his angelic or spiritual consciousness, which is his higher mode of consciousness. Of course, there are endless permutations between these two modes, depending upon whether the consciousness gravitates more to the one of the other.

If we could perceive and experience with the full clarity of our spiritual consciousness, we would be able to see that no visible thing -- nothing belonging to the world of phenomena -- possesses existence or being in its own right. We would understand that, apart from its inner and spiritual dimension and identity, it possesses no reality whatsoever, whether physical, material or substantial, and that the notion that it does so is merely a distortion inherent in the viewpoint of the ego-consciousness. In no way is it possible to separate physics from metaphysics, and in so far as we think it is possible we simply confirm the inanity of our thought.

Thus in so far as modern science presupposes the notion that we can obtain a knowledge of phenomena apart from, and without reference to, a prior knowledge of their inner and spiritual dimension, it is still based totally upon the ego-consciousness, or -- which comes to the same thing -- it is still in servitude to a dualism that opposes mind and matter, subject and object, the knower and what is to be known -- a dualism which represents a total distortion of reality. This means it is tainted with the inhuman and satanic characteristics in man of which this consciousness is the vehicle. That is why its application, in technological or other forms, is liable to be fraught with consequences that are equally inhuman and satanic, whether with regard to our own being or with regard to the natural physical world.

That is why every extension of the influence of our contemporary secular scientific mentality has gone and continues to go hand in hand with a corresponding erosion in us of the sense of the sacred. In fact, we do not have any respect, let alone reverence, for the world of nature because we do not fundamentally have any respect, let alone reverence, for ourselves. It is because we have lost the sense of our own reality that we have lost the sense of every other reality as well. It is because we cripple and mutilate ourselves that we cripple and mutilate everything else as well. Our contemporary crisis is really our own depravity writ large.

The only real answer to this crisis is to stop depraving ourselves. It is to recover a sense of our true identity and dignity, of our self-image as sacred, immortal beings. A false self-view breeds a false worldview, and together they breed our nemesis and the nemesis of the world.

Once we repossess a sense of our own holiness, we will recover the sense of the holiness of the world about us as well. We will then act towards the world with awe and humility that we should possess when we enter a sacred shrine, a temple of love and beauty in which we worship and adore.

Only in this way will we again become aware that our destiny and the destiny of nature are one and the same. Only in this way can we restore a cosmic harmony. To fail here is to fail irrevocably: there can be no escaping our inhuman genocide. Without a sense of the holy and without humility toward the whole -- towards man, nature and towards that which is beyond both man and nature, their transcendent source and origin -- we will simply proceed headlong along the course to self-destruction to which we are now committed, to that nemesis which is our choosing and for which we are entirely responsible.

All this means that if we are to confront our contemporary crisis in a way that goes to its roots, our task is twofold: First we have to get clear in our minds the paradigm of thought that underlies and determines our present self-image and worldview. Unless we first do this, we are liable to become victims of a kind of double-think, attacking the symptoms while remaining subject to the causes that produce the symptoms. And it is all the more important for us to do it because we have tended to forget what the assumptions and presuppositions that characterize this paradigm are: they are deeply imbedded beneath our ordinary thought-processes that we are unaware that they do in fact underlie and determine these processes.

Second, we have to try to recover, or rediscover, the vision of man and nature -- or, rather, the theo-anthropocosmic vision -- that will make it possible for us to perceive and hence to experience both ourselves and the world we live in as the sacred realities that they are. Unless we recover a sense of their sacredness that is based upon a coherent understanding of why they are sacred, our attempts to reaffirm this quality may be debilitated by what in the end is little more than sentimental prejudice.

Our enquiry, therefore, is both anthropological -- concerned with the question of who man is -- and cosmological -- concerned with the question of the nature of the universe. It is ultimately an attempt to reaffirm sacred images of both man and nature: to affirm a sacred human image and a sacred world image.

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