

RETURNING TO NATURE

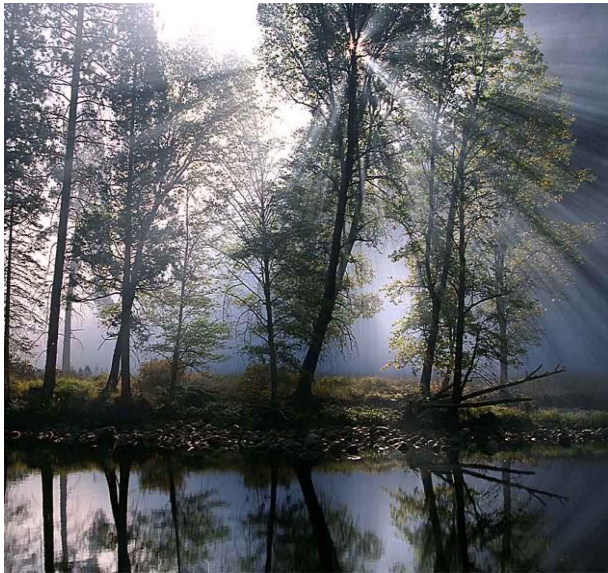
The Evolutionary Journey through Four Eras of Human Culture

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay I explore the long cultural journey of humanity from its roots in the natural world up to the current breakdown of modern industrial civilization, and the destructive ecological, societal, and spiritual impact that its late modern phase is having on the human family and on our garden-planet Earth.

As I have argued elsewhere, we have in recent decades entered into the traumatic breakdown of modern culture, a breakdown that is now in its *acute-crisis phase*. Yet, on the positive side, the hope of a new creative global cultural era is available to us if we will return to drink from the spiritual energies revealed by the Creator through the still unfolding

creation of our mystical planet Earth and the mysticism of the entire cosmos.

Among the many thinkers wrestling with this profound and terminal crisis of modern culture, one whom I have found insightful is the late Thomas Berry, the primary protégé of the late Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Berry's first and most fascinating work in this area is a book called *THE DREAM OF THE EARTH*, a collection of his lyrical essays on the new ecological, geological, and cosmological consciousness and its implications for all human institutions.¹

I will be drawing here primarily particularly from Berry's framework, but also weaving in Marshall McLuhan's framework of four eras of communications (speech, handwriting, mechanical printing, and electronics), and adding as well my own analyses.

To understand Berry's perspective on culture, we have to first look at the history of the universe, within which human history is only an infinitesimal speck. Astrophysicists are pointing out to us that the universe probably had its origin as the explosion of a great 'fireball' – perhaps better imagined as an unfolding "flower" that is still continuing to blossom. Our unfolding universe, in the estimate of astrophysicists, is approximately 13.7 billion years old.

Our advanced human types seem to be more than 100,000 years old or more, with hominid species apparently more than 2 to 3 million years old. Even so, we humans are a recent creation in the long history of the universe.

The strongest strain of contemporary science, drawing on DNA analysis, argues that our forebearers originated in Africa. We humans are all *children of Africa*. So too some new evidence suggests that ancient African civilizations, cen-

¹ See Thomas Berry, *THE DREAM OF THE EARTH* (Sierra Club Books, 1990).

tered especially on the Nile River in Nubia, may be the oldest ones – the mother and father civilizations of all human civilization. Ancient African culture and within it ancient African spirituality could be humanity’s foundational cultural-spiritual stream.

Many ancient human cultures had a deep sense of the presence of the Divine Mystery in the natural world. More recently, the late Thomas Berry proposed that Christians should understand the universe as the primary or fundamental revelation of the Creator. This understanding would be a deep recovery of what the Catholic tradition calls a ‘sacramental’ understanding.

Thus, the Biblical revelations would be understood as chronologically a second wave of revelation – offering healing and greater sanctification through their message of salvation. In that regard, it is important to recall that what Christians call ‘sin’ emerged only recently in universe history and with one species here on planet Earth, though for Christians with cosmic implications.²

But modern Western bourgeois industrial culture, including much of modern Western Christianity, has *lost the deep sacramental sense of Earth as a fundamental revelation from the Creator*, just as so many modern bourgeois westerners have *lost any truly intimate relationship with nature*. This loss is the cultural root of the destructive anti-ecological – as well as anti-social and anti-spiritual – energies ever more intensively being unleashed in late modern bourgeois civilization.

One Catholic group which made this argument early in the 20th Century was the Catholic-supported agrarian movement in the British Isles known as “Distributivism.”³ This perspective strongly influenced the vision of Peter Maurin, co-founder of the US Catholic Worker Movement.⁴

Although humanity appears small and recent in the history of the universe, its meaning is deep. At least in our solar system, we are apparently the only species which can reflect upon ourselves and upon our ecological matrix, and thus achieve reflective self-consciousness. Following Teilhard, we might say that Earth comes to consciousness in us humans who are part of Earth. The Eastern Christian traditions also speaks of humanity as the ‘priests of creation.’

In a real sense then, we may understand ourselves as the reflective consciousness of Earth. Hence our spirituality cannot be separate from our organic connection with Earth, and more broadly with the entire cosmos of which Earth is itself an infinitesimal but special part.

² See also the richer and more scientific interpretation of Thomas Berry and astrophysicist Brian Swimme in their book, *THE UNIVERSE STORY: FROM THE PRIMORDIAL FLARING FORTH TO THE ECOZOIC ERA – A CELEBRATION OF THE UNFOLDING OF THE COSMOS* (HarperOne, 1994).

³ See Fr. Vincent McNabb & William Fahey, *THE CHURCH AND THE LAND* (IHS Press, 2002).

⁴ See Francis J. Sicius’ biography of Maurin, developed from an unfinished manuscript by Dorothy Day, *PETER MAURIN: APOSTLE TO THE WORLD* (Orbis Books, 2004).

It is not that we humans just happen to be standing on planet Earth and just happen to find ourselves within the cosmos. Our bodies and our spirits are completely bound up with the ecological systems of Earth, and of the entire cosmos. (Our bodies and indeed our whole Earth arise out of star dust.) Without our organic roots in our garden-planet Earth, we could only be artificially sustained for a temporary time and then we would die.

Our bodies are organically woven into the very fabric of Earth itself. Earth’s air is moving in and out of our bodies at every moment, giving them life. Our bodies come from and return to the soil, vegetation, and water of Earth. In the same way, the digestive processes that are occurring in our bodies at this very moment are taking sustenance from and returning nutrients to Earth (if they are allowed to follow natural processes).

While Teilhard was perhaps the first modern Western Catholic intellectual to explore what we might call Earth spirituality or cosmic spirituality in a Christian framework,⁵ the pre-modern Psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with ancient cosmic consciousness of the spiritual chorus of praise for the Creator from all creation, which only finds full articulation in human speech.

So too the spiritualities of early Christian Eastern patristic Arab and Greek theologians, more so than early Western theologians, are filled with profound consciousness of the divinization in Christ of Earth and the cosmos. The Greek Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I never tires of repeating that the entire cosmos is a gift of the Creator and the fundamental response of us humans, as the priests of creation, is thanksgiving to the Creator.⁶

In our cosmic human journey, human culture, according to Berry, has passed so far through three major historical eras and is now entering a fourth era. These eras are described here in mythic form as ideal-types. (Actual history is, of course, more complex.) These eras are both simultaneous and chronological since, though we advance to new eras, we still preserve the living heritage of past eras.

Thus, we need to describe these eras not as linear stages but rather as concentric circles. When a tree develops, its trunk grows new rings, but the old rings do not die. Also, when the branches as ‘wings’ of a tree grow, the tree’s roots grow simultaneously. So too it is, or should be, with human culture. But if the roots of a tree begin to die, or if its inner rings begin to rot, then the tree will die. So too, I propose, is the case with human culture.

That is the crisis of modern culture, which has sought to construct a future based on rejection of the past and especially of its roots in nature to whose mystical dimension industrialism has become blind. Seeking to spread its

⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *THE PHENOMENON OF MAN* (HarperCollins, 1976).

⁶ See John Cryssavgis (editor), *COSMIC GRACE: THE ECOLOGICAL VISION OF THE GREEN PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW I* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Company, 2009)

wings, modern culture cuts its own social and ecological roots. It precipitates a wider meaning of what John Paul II called a “culture of death.”

PRIMAL CULTURE
The Organic Root-Metaphor and
Matrifocal Tribal Community
(Beginning in 50,000 BCE?)

The first era of the journey of human culture we may call the *primal*, since it came first and since it remains foundational for all future eras of human culture. It constitutes our deepest root and the innermost ring of the tree of human culture. Since distinct social classes had not yet fully emerged in the primal era, it was roughly egalitarian.

In this era, there is some evidence that women’s wisdom flourished first and grounded the foundations of human culture. Perhaps, just as girls develop physically and intellectually before boys in primary school, so in the primal era of the human journey, some argue that *women’s intelligence* may have emerged first and planted the foundations of human culture.

Following this perspective, we may describe this primal era as a matrifocal, since its greatest religious symbol was the *earth-mother goddess*. This foundational moment of human culture arose from humanity’s African origins and continued with the early development of African and the Middle-Eastern cultures in which the mother symbol remained central. By contrast, with the migration of some human tribes to the cold Eurasian north, the paternal symbol and warrior spirit would emerge as dominant, but that is a story for the second era.

Along with its strengths, the primal era also had its weakness, and the masculine consciousness may not yet have fully developed. In a matrifocal framework, there may be a temptation for women to view men as less intelligent, and to indulge them as if they were children. That manipulative spirit may still persist in some sectors of contemporary matrifocal cultures.

Pathological deformations of primal religion would later emerge with human sacrifice, in which especially children, and particularly the first-born son, would be sacrificed to the mother goddess – supposedly to guarantee continued fertility of Earth and well-being of human community.

Against the horizon of this pathological deformation, the Middle Eastern emergence in the desert of the *sky-father god* as central, notably in the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Jeshuic revelations, represents a different religious spirit. In this revelation, prophetic social and ecological justice becomes a primary religious value set against the idolatries of human sacrifice and exploitation of the poor and of the land.

The symbol of the mother goddess for primal matrifocal culture is typified by the ancient image of the madonna and

child, which still continues in Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Christianity, but is more than 30,000 years old.

Originally the madonna figure probably represented a black African divine mother goddess, and her male child represented her creation of the world. Consciousness of the female face of the Divine Mystery was thus strong, but consciousness of the male face of the Divine Mystery was not equally developed, for the male was seen mainly in the child who was creation, or as consort of the divine mother.

In the next stage, the male face of the Divine Mystery would indeed develop fully and also seek its own patriarchal domination, particularly as warrior tribes from the cold northern Eurasian land mass invaded and conquered the tribes of the warmer southern regions of Eurasia. But something different happened with the Mosaic and Jeshuic revelations, in which the male face of the Divine Mystery became the defender of the poor and of the land against oppression and exploitation.

In this primal era, science and spirituality were not yet differentiated. Together they addressed the wholeness and goodness of life. Science as the act of knowing was understood as communion, not objectivity.

For example, in the ancient Hebrew language, the word for sexual intercourse and the word for knowledge were the same. That is why the King James Version of the Bible faithfully translates in Genesis that Adam “knew” Eve. It was understood that you could truly know something only through intimate relationship with it, only through profound communion with it.

How different the modern epistemological sense of ‘objectified’ scientific knowledge which urges that we have no personal relationship to that which we are trying to know. When we make absolute such an ‘objectified’ model of knowledge, we are tempted to fact destroy our relationship with the very world that we claim to study. Rejection of an epistemology of knowledge as communion threatens to reduce science only into a guide for ecological, social, and spiritual plunder.

The primal matrifocal model of spirituality was also one of intimacy with all creation. The mystical presence of the Divine Mystery was revealed through every breath of air, through every stone, through every leaf, through every star, through every grain of sand. The Divine Mystery, to the tribal people, was immanently known through all creation.

So creation is the ‘primary revelation’ – again, as Berry called it – and creation was and remains the foundational place where we met the Divine Mystery. Creation thus represents what Augustine and other classical Christian theologians called the ‘first book’ of revelation, that is, ‘the Book of Nature’ which is an essential companion volume to the ‘second book’ or the ‘second revelation’ recorded in the book of the Bible. The hierarchical classical language of medieval theology described the former as natural revela-

tion and the later as supernatural revelation, and Aquinas famously stated that grace builds on nature..

Though the matrifocal divine symbol predominated in the primal era, the Creator was nonetheless sometimes seen in the primal era as dyadic, that is, as both male and female. Perhaps this reflects the more ancient hunter-gather stage of the human journey, whereas the matrifocal divine emphasis may have arisen with sedentary agricultural communities.

In the dyadic vision, the Divine Mystery was understood as the union of earth-mother and the sky-father – the earth mother below whose dark, soft earth brought forth constant new life, and the bright sky-father above whose rain fertilized Earth so that she might bring forth life. When the Divine Mystery was understood by this dyadic sexual metaphor, the correlative religious rituals were sexual fertility cults.

We find this consciousness of the two faces of the Divine Mystery, that is, the mutuality of the female and male faces, in the very beginning of the Bible. For Genesis 1: 27 tells us about the Divine Mystery's creation of the humans: "In the Divine Mystery's image they were created; male and female they were created." Thus the Divine Mystery is seen as one, but also as having two complementary faces, one male and one female.

After the Babylonian exile, when the rabbis of Israel gathered to establish which writings would be officially included in the Hebrew Scriptures, reportedly one rabbi raised the question of why the Book of the Song of Songs should be included, because it never mentions the Divine Mystery. As is well known, this book is a love song between a young man and a young woman apparently on their honeymoon, and it celebrates their sexual desire for and sexual communion with each other.

According to some scholars, this book is one of the few examples of Canaanite fertility-cult literature that was carried over into the Hebrew Bible. It has even been conjectured that the story can be traced to the Canaanite Ruth of the Book of Ruth.

Reportedly, in response to the question of why such a book should be in the Hebrew Bible, a great rabbi responded that this is the only book that does not need to mention the Divine Mystery, for the Divine Mystery is clearly present in the couple's sexual-spiritual love.

Christians would expand this dyadic face of the Divine Mystery into the three persons of the Trinity, with the Holy Spirit seen early on by the ancient Syriac Church as the maternal feminine presence of the Divine Mystery. The prayers of the ancient Syrian Christian liturgy, not very far removed from the time of Jesus himself, so described the Holy Spirit as God the Mother.

The great philosopher Hegel, perhaps drawing on his Rosicrucian background but also in a style reminiscent of Syrian

Christian Theology, portrayed the Holy Spirit as feminine, and described the Trinity as the eternal spiritual embrace of the feminine and masculine faces of the Divine Mystery, in turn eternally birthing new life. Paradoxically Hegel's version of the Triune Sacred, which he called the 'dialectic,' would be secularized by Karl Marx as 'Dialectical Materialism.'

But back to the primal perspective. The strength of the primal form of cultural consciousness was that science and technology on one side, and spirituality and religion on the other, were in no way separated from each other and in no way separated from life. The weakness was that human culture, while strongly rooted in women's intelligence, had yet to fully develop men's consciousness.

In this period, while humanity recognized the spiritual presence of the Divine Mystery in all life and saw itself as participating organically in the ecosystem, humanity had not yet awakened to its full ability to consciously develop planet Earth. It was a participant but not yet consciously a co-creator – or only so in the most simple ways.

Yet, the Creator had called humanity not simply to participate in creation, but also to take co-responsibility for evolutionary creativity.

It is the marvel of the human species that on our planet Earth the creative process intensifies through human creativity. That is why so much is at stake when we heighten our scientific-technological consciousness. We are taking onto ourselves, quite legitimately, the divine powers of creation which the Creator has embedded within us, but we must use them according to the divine vision.

This is because our scientific-technological awakening also has the demonic possibility of destroying creation, as we see in the fables of Frankenstein and Faust. That indeed is the late modern crisis. In the late stage of the modern bourgeois industrial era, we seem to be drawing ever closer to devastating the life system across our garden-planet Earth, and at every level from the womb to the planet.

CLASSICAL CULTURE

The Hierarchical Root-Metaphor, Patriarchal-Aristocratic City-States, and Mercantile Empires (5,000 BCE? to 1,500 CE)

The human journey led to a second form of culture, in which humanity began to explore deeply its creative powers in masculine form. This was the classical era of patriarchal warrior civilizations, which were controlled by an aristocratic class from expanding city-states, and which sometimes grew – often through violent plunder – into great mercantile empires.

Though patriarchal in character, the classical patriarchal cultures also provided the historical context for creative contributions by *masculine intelligence* to human conscious-

ness and technologies, and especially, as noted, spiritualities of justice for the oppressed. As the 'green' Catholic eco-feminist philosopher Charlene Spretnak points out, the doctrine of justice for the oppressed emerged out of the male spiritualities of the Abrahamic-Mosaic-Jeshuic revelations – initially in Judaism, later in Christianity, and still later in Islam.⁷

In the Hebrew religion, justice is initially identified with a divine battle for the oppressed and against idolatry, and especially with the battle against human sacrifice, particularly against the human sacrifice of children to the unjust idols of oppressive aristocratic empires. As noted, such empires, standing on economic foundations of economic exploitation and political oppression of peasants, seem often to have been linked in part with late and degraded stages of mother goddess worship.

But the exploration of humanity's technological powers also brought a profound dualism, which clearly expressed what we call 'original sin.' As the book of Genesis discloses, this deep dualism works across multiple axes, and we still suffer from its negative power.

- The first dualism is *ecological*, in which human consciousness began to understand itself as alienated from Earth (leaving the 'garden,' and eventually began to exploit Earth).
- The second dualism is *sexual*, in which males came to dominate females in sexually repressive structures (patriarchy).
- The third dualism is of *societal*, as Cain kills his brother able. Out of this grows the dualism of class-based, ethnic, and national exploitation and oppression of the poor and weak by the rich and powerful, and also the dualism of war. At the heart of this dualism is a social violence, often of a racist or colonialist character.
- The fourth and most fundamental dualism is, of course, *spiritual*, that is, alienation from the Creator.

The book of Genesis tells us in literary mythic terms that, after the original alienation of sin, the Divine Mystery no longer walked in the Garden with the first humans, and that they hid in shame from the Divine Mystery. Still today many people, even many Christians, fail to be at home with the Divine Mystery in the ecological garden of creation.

Later Cain, who kills his brother Abel, becomes a symbol of the violence that flows from the 'original sin.' The book of Genesis tells us that Cain, whose name means 'forger of metal,' was the founder of the first city. The ancient city was founded on the violent domination by aristocratic elites over the rural peasantry by means of metal weapons (e.g., the sword) and metal tools.

⁷ Charlene Spretnak, STATE OF GRACE: THE RECOVERY OF MEANING IN THE POSTMODERN AGE (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

Still later, classical aristocratic elites, following the dualistic Aristotelian and Ptolemaic scientific cosmologies, accepted the natural cycles of the primal vision, but said that they represented a 'lower' material world above which there arose a 'higher' spiritual way. These dominating elites came to think of reality no longer as a circle, but rather as a pyramid. We call this a dualistic cosmology of hierarchy. (Still today, Catholic ecclesial elites continue to use no longer verified scientific cosmologies of the classical era when they identify the episcopacy as 'hierarchy' – a phrase that has no biblical or evangelical roots.)

The pyramid was also circular or cyclical, maintaining the rhythmic 'lower' cycles of nature (assumed to be made of heavy matter and subject to decay) and also of the stars and planets of the 'higher spheres' (assumed to be made of light matter and not subject to decay). But the higher one went on the social-spiritual pyramid, the further one would get away from the cyclic bases of peasants and nature at the bottom – and the place where children are reproduced and cared for, where the crops are grown and food is prepared, and where the material cycles of one's body are attended. It was this 'lower' sphere that primal cultures had celebrated the fundamental revelation of the Divine Mystery.

This patriarchal classical period was a powerful and creative era of civilization, but it also advanced the repressive and alienating dualisms. For example, the 'higher' way was for the elite temple priests, while the 'lower' way was for the ordinary laity.

The 'higher' culture was also to some degree for the authoritarian elites of the aristocracy, while the 'lower' culture was for the peasantry. The higher way was also to some degree for men, while the lower way was for women. Peasants got their hands dirty with the land. The aristocracy tried never to get their hands dirty.

Classical Western European Catholic Christianity, heir to the imperial Roman Empire, internalized key dimensions of this hierarchical, authoritarian, and patriarchal model. That was a valid form of inculturation for evangelization in the classical era, but it would run into trouble when the modern atomistic-mechanistic scientific cosmology displaced its classical cyclical-hierarchical predecessor, just as now the modern cosmology is being displaced by a post-modern holistic cosmology of Quantum Physics.

MODERN CULTURE **The Mechanistic Root-Metaphor,** **Hyper-Masculine Bourgeois Nation-States,** **and Industrial Empires** **(1500 CE to 2000 CE)**

About 500 years ago (though with earlier roots), the classical era of a dualistic aristocratic culture began to break down in the West in the face of a rising *modern bourgeois culture* (which, as proposed, is now breaking down in our own time).

By 'bourgeois' I simply mean urban, that is, the way of life created by social classes living in cities – with little or no understanding of the planet's ecosystem. In its original meaning, bourgeois simply means a town or city dweller, though sociologically it refers to the urban middle and upper classes who were not aristocrats or peasants.

In the emergence of this new bourgeois process, Western culture went through a series of traumatic spiritual, philosophical, religious, scientific, political, and economic revolutions, all of which progressively ushered in the modern industrial world in both capitalist and socialist forms.

Even earlier than 500 years ago, the bourgeois philosophy of Nominalism (known as the *via moderna*) and a parallel bourgeois pietistic spirituality of psychological interiority (known as the *devotio moderna*) represented perhaps the first individualistic cultural expressions of bourgeois modernity.

But the strongest popular cultural impetus for the modern world came with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century – closely linked with the modern revolution of mechanical printing that brought the Bible and literacy to the expanding European middle classes, and closely linked with the rise of the 'New Science' (based on a revival of the atomistic-materialist cosmology of the Greek philosophers Democritus and Epicurus, and the Roman Lucretius).

The initial political triumph for the European bourgeois ascent to world power came with the first wave of modern Western *colonialism* -- in mercantile form beginning in the sixteenth century. Here, in what Bartolomé de las Casas revealed as the violent conquest of the native peoples and lands of the Americas and in the violent plunder of African youth in the Atlantic slave system, the European and European-American bourgeoisie (initially an alliance of the aristocratic monarchies and 'haute-bourgeois' bankers in the stage of 'Absolutism') gained the financial wealth and military power to begin the Western European and later European-American rise to global domination.

Later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, European and European-American industrial colonialism – supported by the industrial development of the steamship, railroad, and machine gun – would conquer by ferocious violence much of Asia and Africa and establish an industrial neo-colonialism over Latin America and the Caribbean.

A foundational wave of bourgeois advance came with the early modern European *scientific revolution* with its atomistic-mechanistic-materialist cosmology (again, taken from Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius), and then with the modern European 'Enlightenment' of modern Liberalism, which applied the atomistic-mechanistic-materialist cosmology to society as 'social science.'

This was in turn later expressed politically in the liberal *democratic revolutions* of America and France, which created new models of bourgeois democracy. Toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, it

finally triumphed economically with the second phase of the modern 'liberal capitalist,' and later 'scientific socialist', *industrial revolution* – with the bourgeoisie in the former case controlling capital through the market and in the latter case through the state.

The earlier foundation for the intellectual development for all modern bourgeois revolutions was the medieval establishment of the Western *university system*, initially under Catholic auspices and copied from older Islamic universities. It was not coincidental that, despite the rising influence of women intellectuals through the expanding feminine side of medieval Catholic monasticism (with Hildegard of Bingen as a prime example), the medieval university system excluded women.

As a result, the modern era, which has its primary intellectual guidance from the university, would become not simply patriarchal but even more so *hyper-masculine*. In our own time, guided by the modern university, modern liberal bourgeois freedom and progress would become scientifically and technologically available to both men and women, but only in hyper-masculine form.

Finally, we stand now at the conclusion of the modern world, when all its revolutions have been worked out and the modern European and European-American bourgeois way of life appears to be triumphing globally. But it is precisely at this point of climax for the hyper-masculine Western bourgeois industrial drive that the modern atomistic-mechanistic form of scientific-technological society proves comprehensibly *unsustainable* and so begins to collapse ecologically, socially, and spiritually.

Berry calls the modern period the "techno-industrial era" of human culture. In this era, we discovered the masculine side of humanity's creative scientific-technological power to change the world, a power that the Creator has embedded within human consciousness.

We discovered through the marvel of modern science and technology that we can transform our world. As a result, we now realize that the technological genius that the Divine Mystery embedded in human consciousness is almost unfathomable.

The great problem, however, is that this modern model of science and technology was based on the classical dualism. Still worse, it then rebelled against the dualism and replaced it with the modern reductionist atomistic-mechanistic-materialist cosmology, and it then pressed humanity toward more dangerous hyper-masculine directions than the classical world ever dreamed of.

Thus, while the classical era represented a limited aristocratic masculine domination, the modern bourgeois world vastly expanded the reconstruction of the world according to the one-sided elite masculine imagination. Now all becomes industrial warrior competition.

With modernization, the classical arrow of transcendence rising up in the pyramid becomes tipped sideways from its vertical perspective and pointed horizontally forward in time as modern historical 'progress,' a so-called progress that breaks with its roots in the past traditions and with its roots in the ecology of human and natural community. In turn, the uprooting of persons from natural and social community turns them into supposedly 'free' individuals. But this 'freedom' and 'progress' then often are inverted into as deadly attacks on the ecological, social, and spiritual sustainability of the creative communion of life itself – that is, they create a 'culture of death.'

The foundational myths of the modern techno-industrial progress assumed that the modern future would be good, and that the premodern past was bad (i.e., steeped in 'ignorance and superstition'). In this process, the whole bourgeois society became in symbolic terms hyper-masculine, eliminating the traditionally strong feminine infrastructure originally surviving within peasant culture but disappearing with the triumph of bourgeois urbanization..

Increasingly all became become urban or later suburban. In African cultural terms, modernity became an all consuming 'fire' with no healing 'water.' In Asian cultural terms, it became totally *yang*, trying to repress completely *yin*.

At the same time that the arrow of transcendence was lowered on the horizon to become the arrow of progress, there came a battle between the Reformation's totally transcendent image of the Divine Mystery, abandoning the primary revelation in nature, and the modern materialist paradigm of science, in which nature was seen as possessing immanent power (particularly energy resources) but no spiritual meaning.

The Reformation's purely transcendent image of the Divine Mystery, again suppressing the immanence of the Divine Mystery in the first revelation in the Book of Nature, then became privatized into psychological interiority. Later, it was attacked by more radical atheistic forms of modernization, both by the theoretical atheism of Marxism and by the practical atheism of much of capitalist materialism.

As the new secularizing vision of science came to be ever more powerful, many Protestant and Catholic bourgeois Christians eventually settled for a privatized religion disconnected from political and economic life. The exception on the Protestant side was the Social Gospel tradition, and on the Catholic side it has been Social Catholicism, eventually producing Catholic Social Teaching.

In late modern period, a schizophrenic and dysfunctional dynamic emerged as foundational for the modern bourgeois consciousness. The linear and driving mission of the masculine consciousness became culturally normative for the outer so-called 'secular' world of economic and political life, and for institutional governance as a whole. Meanwhile, the feminine circular and relational communion be-

came culturally normative for the inner 'spiritual' world of religion and family, and for psychological processes.

The result, however, was not a healthy marriage, but rather the dysfunctional system of an addictive outer materialist scientific-technological drive to plunder the social and natural worlds, with a codependent enabling for inner spiritual-literary retreat in to a psychological cult of domesticity.

With the advent of the postmodern Electronic Revolution, and particularly with television and other forms of media, modern techno-industrial ideologies now invaded both the home and the inner psyche. As a result, today's globalized bourgeois free-market ideology has achieved symbolic hegemony even within the inner psychological sphere originally assigned by bourgeois consciousness to religion and family. Not surprisingly, the family becomes undermined and religious participation by young people is weakened by the media hegemony of an expanding utilitarian market culture mediated by a small number of extremely powerful global culture industries.

The modern bourgeois model of time, as the hyper-masculine linear arrow of secular progress, is now triumphing across the planet; all becomes uprooting 'progress.' In the same moment, the modern bourgeois model of space also triumphs. The classical pyramid and the primal circle both yield before the image of a modern table of billiard balls – made up of endless and separate atoms fragmented and 'freed' from each other as only competing individuals.

The modern world has called this atomistic-mechanistic vision 'freedom,' but such 'freedom' too often now reveals itself to be only the empty freedom of a 'free-market' ideology of economism devoid of meaning and empty of truth. To be freed from true solidarity with other humans, to be freed from care for the natural world, and ultimately to be freed from communion with the Creator, all becomes the negative content of alienated bourgeois freedom.

We know this freedom today as the alienated utilitarian individualism aggressively promoted by the triumphing global free-market culture, which is ultimately accountable only to investor elites of giant global conglomerates, and of giant nation-states whose gargantuan sovereign investment funds also attempt to shape the global market.

The overall cosmology of the modern bourgeois utilitarian imagination sees both society and nature as a materialist machine devoid of meaning or authentic substantive freedom. It assumes that, so long as the separate parts can be rendered autonomous, put into counter-pressure with each other, and kept moving, the arrow of modern mechanistic-materialist progress will continue to increase modern mechanistic-materialist freedom.

But we now see that the atomistic-mechanistic-materialist cosmology at the heart of modern bourgeois culture produces an inherently degenerative and so unsustainable way of life. In this cosmology, atomistic-mechanistic-materialist

paradigm of science is seen as the objective ability to control and manipulate the atomistic billiard balls on the table – economically in a free market, politically in liberal democracy, and culturally in psychological individualism. Yet it now is clear that modernity’s utilitarian vision of freedom and progress cuts us off more and more from our roots in the human community, from our roots in nature, and from our roots in the Divine Mystery, and leads us toward a culture of violence drawing ever closer to ecological, societal, and spiritual death.

In a machine, the parts are not truly related to each other. They are really separate and are held together only by artificial force (nuts and bolts, welds, etc.) For example, one can take a gasoline-powered lawn mower apart, clean all the parts, perhaps replace a few, and then put it all back together again so that it will run better than before. But there’s a problem if we try to do that with something that is alive, for example, my pet dog. If I were to take it apart my pet dog, clean all the parts, and try to reassemble the parts, it would not work. The dog would be dead. Why?

The relationship among the parts in a living animal is very different from the relationship among the parts in a dead machine. It is not *mechanistic* but *organic*. The parts in a living organic animal are in intimate communion. Its organic life-system depends upon the vital communion of the parts. Separate the parts completely and the life is killed.

All of nature, and human society within nature, has a living dimension, both in the organic relationship among humans and in our organic relationship with the rest of the living natural world. So when we treat human society or our ecosystems as if they were mechanistic instead of organic, we find that purely mechanistic progress without organic life, and purely mechanistic freedom without organic truth, finally becomes a new tyranny that destroys the ecological, social, and spiritual creative-communion of life.

Unfortunately, much of our contemporary media promotes atomistic-mechanistic-materialist images of freedom and progress. Such media have become the primary socializing force for many of our children. Such media socialize them into the destructive materialist culture of late modern bourgeois civilization, a civilization increasingly set on a path of ecological, social, and spiritual devastation.

Society used to have three powerful socializing institutions: the family, the school, and religion. Now gargantuan mega-corporations controlling global electronic media have become the fourth. In their current global cultural hegemony, these transnational corporations, often linked to global finance, have become more powerful and effective than the other three traditional sources of socialization.

Ultimately, the late modern bourgeois erosion of ecological, social and spiritual communion leads to the conversion of our divine-like energies of creativity into demonic energies of destruction. As a result, we now face the possibility of extensively diminishing the life system of planet Earth.

Humanity and the Earth’s splendid biosphere have never been in such a threatening situation before. This is the terminal crisis of late modern culture.

The exploding devastation of our planetary ecosystem, the expanding marginalization of the poor, the growing security threats of terrorism and nuclear war, the plague of the global drug trade, the advent of mass technological abortion and euthanasia with both arising against the horizon of a return of eugenics, the tragic weakening of both the extended and the nuclear family, all of these frightening realities are but many clear windows into the deeper and comprehensive collapse of the modern meaning system.

In this context, how absurd becomes the modern dichotomy of spiritual and scientific energies. In a situation where the fundamental life system of our planet is threatened, how can we imagine religion as a private affair having nothing to do with politics and economics? Or how can we imagine science itself as a value-free project requiring no deeper ground than itself?

All of life itself is sacred, since life is the Creator’s creation still shining with the Creator’s creative presence.

POSTMODERN CULTURE

The Root-Metaphor of Creative-Communion, the New Global Civilization, and Sustainable Local Communities (2000 CE . . .)

GRatefully, there is a promise of healing and regeneration for the crisis of late modern culture with the *new philosophical-scientific cosmology* presently emerging among some thinkers from fresh insights of postmodern science and authentically postmodern philosophy. This authentically postmodern cosmology points to the possibility of a holistic and regenerative planetary culture.

I believe that this new planetary culture is coming from the Holy Spirit as the Divine Mystery’s way of healing the destructive energies unleashed in the late-modern bourgeois era. I describe this new culture as *postmodern*, though not in the current academic meaning of ‘postmodernism.’

I see *academic postmodernism*, despite its legitimate insights, as a late modern philosophical school which only radicalizes the philosophical premises of modern Western culture, and threatens to collapse modern capitalism’s *utilitarianism* into what may become a postmodern totalitarian *nihilism*.

The symbol of this new culture is not the primal circle, because the circle went round and round in the same rut. It is not the classical vertical arrow of transcendence which sought to rise above the world, and in turn to dominate it by violence. Nor is it the modern horizontal arrow of up-rooted progress, which is turning into a deadly boomerang. Rather, it is the *spiral*.

The primal era grounded our consciousness in feminine cyclical organic technologies rooted in nature, but it did not allow us to understand the linear technological power that would later be developed by male consciousness. The male dominant eras of classicism and modernity helped us to discover our linear ability to advance through metallurgical and later petro-chemical technologies, but the respective hierarchical-dualistic and atomistic-mechanistic-materialist root metaphors guiding them remained unbalanced on the masculine side – with an ultimately destructive late modern crisis.

Now, preserving the positive cultural gifts of these prior eras while liberating ourselves from their limitations, we can place their abiding cultural insights together in a new holism. The marriage of the circle and the line brings for the symbol of the spiral, which sees time as a creative circle continuing the past cycles and incorporating new ones.

This holistic postmodern spiral-like rhythm goes back to the past to drink from its roots, and simultaneously reaches forward into the future to midwife new creativity. It is a living tree, which in its trunk grows new rings while sustaining old ones, and in its branches spreads wider and higher wings while sinking deeper and broader roots.

As this global postmodern era emerges, one of its most important expressions is *a growing network of rural centers of regeneration across the planet* – not surprisingly often founded by women, though sometimes also by men. Such centers are not utopian communities, but simply practical experiments in ecological, social, and spiritual sustainability.

They will no doubt face their own internal contradictions, but they represent, I propose, the seeds of a viable future and embody the guiding cosmological vision of the new era of the human journey.

Unless we return to learn from nature and to drink from its Divine-Mystery-given sacramental energy, and in that process unless we place the full range of feminine and masculine energies into authentic partnership, we will not be able to heal the late modern bourgeois pathology.

We need, therefore, to create places where women and men as partners – even while still living in urban or suburban locations – can return to the land for deep spiritual and cultural nourishment and explore new models of sustainable community.

We need places across the world where food will be grown locally and organically, especially by the poor; where the power of the sun will be tapped through solar energy; where we can begin to disengage from the destructive petroleum based system; where the children can feel their intimate communion with Earth and be renewed by it; and above all where presently poor people can find a real home and flourish.

On such centers of land, poor people, who are presently being marginalized, can sustain themselves through coop-

erative economic movements, included community supported agriculture. This is what we should explore together: alternative ecological technologies linked to the land.

It is this path that will awaken us again to the primary revelation, the Book of Nature, which is the indispensable foundation for the second book of revelation, the Bible.

CONCLUSION

Only a civilization that cares for Earth, that learns from it, and that drinks of its spiritual nourishment will be a sustainable civilization for the future.

Like the founders of the agrarian Distributivist Movement of the British Isles, Peter Maurin, the child of French peasants and co-founder with Dorothy Day of Catholic Worker movement, talked about *rural communes* which would be *agronomic universities* where we ourselves can be healed, where we can help to heal other people, and where we can heal Earth.⁸ All will be healed, Peter proposed, only in and through a return to the land.



So we have the possibility of a healing and authentically postmodern planetary culture being born – a truly new culture only for the fourth time in tens of thousands of years of human culture. A new vision of spirituality stands at the foundation of this culture, a regenerative spirituality of spiritual, social, and ecological co-creativity, of love and care for the Divine Mystery's holy Earth and for all the holy peoples and all creatures who dwell in it.

Again, one central way – though not the only way – to help the birth of this new global civilization is the creation of a global network of rurally based centers where people can live on the land, where people can visit the land, where

⁸ See his Peter Maurin, *EASY ESSAYS* (Academy Guild Press, 1977).

poor people can be sustained on the land, and where food can be grown on land to sustain even the poor of the city.

While the poor of the planet are increasingly forced into catastrophic megacities – potentially death-traps – especially across the Global South, this return of poor and unemployed individuals and their families to the land, where they would welcome miniaturized and relatively inexpensive electronic technologies for cooperative work, may be the core challenge for Catholic Social Teaching, for all of Catholicism and for all of Christianity, for all world religions, and for all people of good will across the entire human family.

It may also be the core challenge to and to all human institutions, and especially to the key institution of the new knowledge society, *the university*. But that subject would require yet another essay.

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