



Resolutions To Action

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Choosing Simplicity in a Context of Deep Time

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The primary source of these reflections are the writings of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme as they have articulated their insights on a new cosmology.

EXPERIENCE

Carbon-offsets, ecological footprint, peak oil, global climate change, habitat loss, levels of toxicity...the list goes on and on. How are we to respond to these new dimensions of an ethical imperative which is core to the life of a vowed religious attempting to give witness to the presence of God in history?

When we were challenged in the light of Vatican II to call ourselves to read the signs of the times and respond with gospel values to the plight of the human community, we ventured into areas for which we had little preparation. Confronting militarism, racism, sexism, and every other form of injustice, we committed to a profound transformation of the cultural values embedded in American society and in our own psyches. We also developed the skills and tools necessary for so deep a transformation. We learned listening and communication skills, conflict-resolution, consensus-build-

ing and creative problem-solving skills.... all this at the service of life as the human family was navigating the volatile last decades of the twentieth century.

Now, in these beginning years of the 21st century we have become aware that the response we make to global economic and social disparity must align with a growing and radically new perception of the consequences our activities have on a starkly threatened living planet. Ecological devastation looms large. Just when we are being confronted with the end of an era of the cheap fossil fuels which gave rise to an explosion of material consumption, we are also faced with the evidence of global climate change aggravated by the same industrialized growth. Whether within rich or poor nations this generation faces a new complexity which questions the modern world's expectation of unlimited growth and its belief that technology will fix every challenge we face.

COSMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AS WELL AS SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Over these last decades, religious have become versed in reflecting on the signs of the times

through the lens of social analysis, a discernment process that has helped us understand the structural causes of so much human suffering and injustice. While this lens has been invaluable for discerning the institutional violence imposed on some people by others, it is inadequate for discerning the ecological crisis that loom on all sides, threatening rich and poor alike, but also threatening the very web of life itself.

However, we have a new lens capable of understanding the scope of these ecological crises as well as new understandings for addressing them with perspectives beginning to emerge from within the Judeo-Christian tradition. These perspectives were not available to

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our forebears as they lay down the ethical principles on which our Christian social analysis has developed. These are literal lenses, powerful instruments like the Hubble telescope which have expanded our capacities to see into the far reaches of time and space. These ranges are not available to the unaided senses and were beyond the capacities of our forebears to acquire.

We are now able to see into "deep time" that is, into evolutionary time and space. These observations have given rise to our knowledge of how the Universe, galaxies, Earth, life, and hu-

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man consciousness emerged as a single unbroken sequence of events which contextualize our existence and out of which we are called to participate in the miracle of life and meaning. In addition, this context of evolutionary time and space reveals an inviolate unity that exists within the entire order of being. This unity is exquisite and irrefutable. It is also demanding to our minds and hearts.

Deep time also reveals to us that the capacity for life, spirit, and consciousness has been present within the universe from its beginning and throughout its 13 billion year development. Thus, if human life and consciousness are present now, they had to have been potentially present from the beginning, emerging from within the process not as an outside intervention. This understanding changes everything. It sheds light on one of the deepest flaws within our collective western worldview: that humanity is inherently separate from nature. It also points to some of the

religious limitations this worldview has for transforming our present dilemma.

Western civilization is the cultural expression of the story our forebears created to explain the origin and nature of the world. Some of the assumptions they made suggested that only the human person had an immortal, transcendent soul which was directly infused by an eternal, transcendent Creator. The rest of the created order, while good and worthy of respect and care, was intrinsically different from humanity. The essential difference was in its material nature. All non-human beings lacked a spiritual soul and thus they lacked any inherent rights to their own existence or to a meaning or value outside that subscribed by human beings. We believed this difference was fundamental.

The consequences of this sense of separation have resulted in a fundamental dilemma that separates us from any continuity with or guidance from the evolutionary process itself. It has also uprooted us from the unity of the universe. Not only have the human injustices of racism, sexism, militarism, and violence ensued, but more fundamentally this world view has given rise to the perception that nature was here for us to define and ultimately to use for our advantage. It also set the stage for giving all rights to the human person, as enshrined in our democratic institutions, but it cut off the interrelated physical and spiritual bonding of the whole, thus diminishing a sense of rights as belonging to the air, waters, forests, animals, and the whole web of being.

Without this understanding of the fundamental unity of all being, revealed only recently in our scientific observations of the inner and outer dimensions of the Universe and Earth, we will make little progress in our efforts to curb the ecological devastation threatening the planet's future, not only the rich and poor of the human species.

From the perspective of biological and geological time, our human species --

through our globalized, industrial economies -- is unraveling the conditions of the Cenozoic era. This 65 million year old period represents the beauty, diversity, health, and magnificence of the outer world as we have experienced and understood it in our short history as a species. All that beauty, the grandeur of the skies, the life giving properties of water, the nourishment of food and the experience of health, joy and well-being were all essential for the development of our spiritual, emotional, and physical lives. They were also essential for the development of our images of God and of the sacred dimensions of existence.

We are the generation sharing life just at the time when these conditions are diminishing. Not only is religious life at a point of diminishment, not only is western civilization and its major institutions imploding, but the greater context of life itself is under grave threat, precisely because of the human activity created and abetted by the very thinking and activities of these same institutions.

It is a cosmological analysis that must emerge to open the deeper understand-

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ings not yet expressed in the social analysis that has served us in the past. We cannot abandon social analysis. It is critical to solving the human injustices that continue to perpetuate themselves. But it must be expanded by scientific revelations only now available for our observation.

Part Two of this essay, which consists of reflection and suggested actions, will be published in October 2009.