

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 26

The Churches, Climate Change, and the New Cosmology

Do the religious organizations have a role to play in the climate change challenge? If so, what is it?

(My experience is with mainline Christian churches. They have aging populations and fewer young people joining. For increasing numbers of people the churches seem irrelevant—unable to deal with the modern world's challenges.)

One reason for this decline is undoubtedly the churches' problem with science. It is an old problem.

In the early 1600s, when Galileo looked up at the moon with his new telescope and realized what he had discovered he might have said to himself, "Oh Boy, I'm in trouble!" He could see that the sun was not going around the earth as the Bible stated. The earth was going around the sun. When he published his findings he was condemned as a heretic by the Roman Catholic Inquisition, made to recant and was placed under house arrest for the rest of his life.

Today we live in a very different world from that of Galileo. Scientists call it the Anthropocene--the new and first "man-made" world with its climate change. Some church leaders do not deny the scientific findings about climate change. They will act to help all of those who are suffering from its impacts. But, with few exceptions, even the liberal churches can't seem to deal with the causes of problems—the economic and political systems that are exploiting Earth's limited resources and triggering global warming.

It is clear that churches need a new and different way of understanding the relationship between their institutions and the changing world. Fortunately a new approach is emerging—one that embraces a new relationship to science. .

It is called the New Cosmology. It is a different way of seeing the world and giving it meaning. Its basic principle: the Human story and the Earth story are one story. We humans, through evolution, are earthlings, part of a living earth and conscious universe.

The developers of this movement have a deep understanding of world religions, science and cultures. Many people are involved but there are five people in particular who have played key roles in developing this new approach

Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a Jesuit priest and paleontologist. Teilhard noted that Earth from the moment of the Big Bang was both a psychic/spiritual reality as well as a physical reality. Earth and all life forms are part of a conscious universe. Our human consciousness is evolution reflecting upon itself.

Thomas Berry (1914-2009), influenced by Teilhard, was a monk, priest and cultural historian. On occasions when he was asked what the churches could do about saving the environment he said, *"It would help if they put the Bible on the shelf for about twenty years."* He loved the scriptures but the Bible says nothing about climate change. For Berry, Earth and the conscious Universe are the primary manifestations of the divine. If we lived on the moon, he used to say, we would have no awareness of the beauty and loving care of a divine presence in our lives.

Brian Thomas Swimme (Born 1950) is a mathematical cosmologist teaching at the California Institute of Integral Studies. He is the co-author with Berry of *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, a Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (a specialist in Eastern religions) and John Grim (a specialist in Native American culture) are two professors at Yale University. Students of Berry, they worked with Swimme to develop the film, *Journey of the Universe: The Epic Story of Cosmic, Earth and Human Transformation*

The New Cosmologists do not try to change church structure or doctrine. They focus on spirituality.

Because we are all earthlings and the product of an evolving Earth and conscious universe our spirituality must be an Earth Spirituality. As Teilhard put it, *"We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey"*.

Because we are all spiritual beings, spirituality is the awakening of something deep within us. This is true whether we believe in the existence of God or have a different personal spirituality. No particular faith group has the spiritual franchise.

Because an Earth Spirituality depends heavily upon our understanding of Earth, science is indispensable. Science can't prove the existence of God (an old debate). But it can provide invaluable insights into our understanding of Earth and the universe of which we are a part.

Embracing an Earth Spirituality means we identify more closely with all living beings and their needs. We can choose to respond to those needs or not. If we choose to respond, we must work with others to help our living Earth heal itself.

And the role of organized religions?

They can still benefit from their traditional resources. But to meet the needs of a changing world they must change their focus from a Bible-based spirituality to an Earth spirituality.

This new perspective can also help churches discover a new common ground. The goal of ecumenism has always been to reach agreement on structure, dogma and interpretation of texts. But with an Earth spirituality that is available to everyone and all religions a new common ground emerges. We are all standing on it.

Katharine Hayhoe is a Canadian atmospheric scientist at Texas Tech University. She is also a Protestant Evangelical Christian deeply concerned about climate change. She often gives talks to fundamentalist Christian churches. In her talks she makes the point that God has given us a brain and we have to use it. As to her approach, she notes *“Spirituality is the door through which we must enter to understand what is happening in our climate changing world.”*

Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network.