

## **CONVERTING THE CHURCHES TO A NEW COSMOLOGY**

A little over a year ago my wife and I decided to downsize. We had been helping some elderly friends and all of them were using walkers. Given our own ages we figured this was a prediction of things to come for us, too.

In our previous house all the essential things—the kitchen, the bedrooms, the showers—were upstairs on the second floor—not easy to get up the steps with walkers. We decided to move into a place where everything we need is on the main floor.

Making transitions means going from one situation to a very different one. It is important to know why we have to change and it is important to find something that will meet both our immediate and future needs. But it is not a matter of just deciding to make the move. We spent many hours finding a suitable dwelling, figuring out what would fit in the new house and getting rid of the things that would no longer be useful.

The Christian Churches—and here I'm referring to the mainstream Christian Churches I'm familiar with—were leaders in a wide variety of social change issues: schools, hospitals and medical services, racial integration, development of labour unions, reform of prisons, opposition to wars and nuclear weapons, and so forth. But in terms of climate change they have been strangely silent. (A notable exception is Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* on the climate changing world. Unfortunately it hasn't gained much traction at the local level among bishops and clergy.)

One reason why the churches do not engage in climate change is that they are in decline. People of all ages, but especially younger people, no longer find the church's teachings relevant to the modern world in which they live. There is also a large decrease in the number of candidates for the ministry and priesthood. The number of women entering convents has dwindled. Some convents have become nursing homes and they are not accepting new members. .

The churches, too, need to downsize. They must make a transition from the older world they grew up in to the new world they have now entered into. And to do this they must understand both the old world and the new world.

### **Making the Transition.**

In 1988 Thomas Berry, a Roman Catholic priest and cultural historian, wrote a famous essay. It talked about transitions and was entitled "*The New Story*".

The old story he was talking about was a cosmological story about the seven day creation of the Earth, the galaxies and the universe. He noted that for centuries this cosmological story has served us well. As interpreted by the churches it gave us a sense of who we are and our role in the world. But now, in a modern and changing world, the old cosmological story is no longer helpful.

The development of a new story has already started, based upon our scientific explanation of the universe. But it adds to the scientific story an additional dimension--the story of the creation of Earth and the human. Thus it is referred to as the New Cosmology.

So, in terms of seeing the world and giving it meaning, we are in between cosmological stories; the old traditional cosmology and the New Cosmology. We need to downsize and make the transition. Here is a side by side explanation of the two stories.

### **The Churches and the Old Cosmology Story**

The current cosmology story for most Christian denominations is an ancient story based upon the Bible. God creates the world and the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden. Adam sins and they are cast out of the garden. But Earth is damaged by Adam's sin. It inherits the so-called "original sin" that affects all humans. According to the church's' interpretations Earth is a dangerous and sinful world where Adam's descendants are tainted. It is a place to prepare for life after death.

The church is a hierarchical system. Its rulers, the clergy, are the decision-makers. Their key role has been to interpret the Bible. They decided what was sinful and what was acceptable. They added some cosmological dimensions: a heaven, a hell and places like Purgatory and Limbo.

I grew up with this cosmology and believed in it during the years I lived a monastic life and worked as a priest. Christian churches have a long history of members who placed their faith in this old cosmology. They loved God and cared for their neighbours and still do. But things are changing.

### **The New Cosmological Story**

We have an expression in modern organization theory that "form follows function". It indicates that the service that is being provided (the function) determines the kind of structure (the form) that is needed to provide the service. In our discussion the function is the spirituality, and the form is religious structure or the church.

The first written scriptures in the Bible appeared around 50 AD, several decades after the death of Jesus in the 30s. They were based upon the memories of the elders, who knew about the spiritual dimension of Jesus' teachings.

In the early fourth Century, after the persecutions and the battles with heresies, the Roman Empire declared Christianity to be the official religion. By this time the role of the church leaders was to be the sole interpreters of the scriptures and to determine what the official spirituality should be. Thus things were turned around. The "form"—the religious structure--was dictating the function—the spirituality. This reversal of form and function has continued down to this day. It has led to a number of problems including the concept of a "one true Church".

## **Our Relationship with Earth**

As most of us are aware, our human species has evolved from other species. Unfortunately even those who accept evolution do not find it to be particularly relevant. We tend to view our species as being superior to other species. Once we accept this idea it inevitably leads to a separation between “us” and “them”. But not everywhere.

Many indigenous communities have tried to maintain their relationship with Earth. This is expressed in their phrase “All my Relations”. They see their personal spirituality as part of an Earth spirituality. The New Cosmology sees it as one, single spirituality. We were all born into a sacred Earth. So churches don’t create our spirituality though they can help facilitate it through various practices and rituals. This reality of our human-Earth spirituality was best expressed for me in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, a priest in the Jesuit order and a paleontologist. He said, “*We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.*”

## **Our Mission**

Once we recognize our relationship with Earth we begin to realize our responsibility for Earth. This is not just a matter of stewardship--participating in environmental movements, as good as these are. It is recognition that Earth has been stewarding us since time immemorial. We have come from Earth through the process of evolution. We are related to Earth. Earth is our greater self. We are dependent upon Earth for our continued existence.

Two of the leaders of the New Cosmology, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, believe we have entered a new age-- the Anthropocene. Within this man-made age they envision an “Ecozoic Era.” (“Eco “is derived from the Greek and means “house or home”. “Zoic” “means “pertained to living beings.”) Thus, the house or home of living beings includes us humans as well as all other living species. The Ecozoic is a vision to work toward.

They have also developed a mission statement to guide us in this new climate changing world we have entered. “*We must create and maintain a mutually enhancing relationship with our species and Earth.* Though the statement is quite simple, implementing it in a world of integrated systems will be challenging.

It has become quite apparent that in this relatively new Anthropocene age it is the systems we have put in place that are the major cause of climate change. I refer specifically to the economic, political and legal systems. In this article I would like to focus on the legal systems. Why? Because we need some criteria to determine how our efforts to create a mutually enhancing relationship with our species and Earth are succeeding.

## **Earth Jurisprudence**

The term Earth jurisprudence refers specifically to a legal system that recognizes the rights of nature. This is not a totally new concept.

In 1972 Christopher D. Stone wrote a book entitled “*Should Trees Have Standing?*” The same year there was a landmark case based upon Stone’s insight before the U.S. Supreme Court (Sierra Club v. Morton) The Court rejected it but the dissenting judge, William O. Douglas tried to argue that, if we give rights to inanimate objects like corporations, why shouldn’t we give rights to living things like nature?

In recent years there has been a great deal more emphasis on the rights of nature, motivated in large part by the work of Thomas Berry who coined the term [Earth Jurisprudence](#). He made the point that long before there were any human laws there were the laws of nature. Human laws should flow from nature but instead, human laws have taken over the laws of nature. It is pretty obvious that human environmental laws do not protect nature. They only limit the amount of damage we can do to nature.

The importance of an Earth Jurisprudence is that it provides us with criteria—a way of determining the validity of systems, especially the new systems we must introduce. It builds upon the insight of the early environmentalist, Aldo Leopold, He noted in his Sand County Almanac, “*A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.*”

### **Making the Transition**

To summarize, in this article I started with the challenge facing the Christian Churches. I then discussed the old cosmological story and the need for a new cosmological story. In the new cosmological story I discussed our need to redefine our relationship with Earth, our mission, and an Earth Jurisprudence.

In concluding I would like to turn again to the downsizing analogy I started with. We have to make the transition from the old cosmology to the New Cosmology, taking with us whatever was valuable in the past. I think what is essential to keep is our spirituality whatever that might mean for each one of us.

Given the ominous climate change warnings from the scientists, the religious organizations and churches must take a lead role in this task immediately. However, making the transition will not be easy.

It will mean confronting the same opposition that many groups dealing with climate change are already experiencing. There will be both success and failures, many of both over an extended period of time. But it seems that this is the new mission the churches are being called upon to accept.

If they accept this mission they will be guided by their spirituality. And perhaps that spirituality will provide the light that Leonard Cohen talked about...

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.

If you wish more information on the new Cosmology there are many websites and articles online. Just Google: Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Iliia Delio, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim.

Mike Bell, [www.comoxvalleyclimatechangenetwork.ca](http://www.comoxvalleyclimatechangenetwork.ca)