

The World as a Holy Place

by

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The natural world has long provided humanity with metaphors for social structure and sacred expression. Native North American myths, for instance, point to the sacredness of the earth as the basis for social life. Some Chinese traditions maintain that social order is derived from nature: the patterns of the universal life force, *qi*, in Yin and Yang, the four seasons, the structure of the landscape and the order of the stars and planets. The core insight of these old views is that humans are connected to all other forms of life, that we are a part of the whole of things. Modern writers such as Thoreau, Whitman, Muir and Abbey, among others, tell us that our relationship with nature is our most basic reality.

Contemporary science—biology, palaeontology, physics, astronomy—provides this idea with a factual foundation. What may once have been seen as vague nature mysticism defines, in fact, the way things really are, and provides an in-depth understanding of the truth about our own existence. It makes it possible to find the sacred and a sense of transcendence within the physical universe, to see this world as a holy place.

Most of today's dominant religious traditions, however, point beyond the natural world to a place outside our universe to define what is sacred. Ancient Indian thinkers understood that the universe was immense, but neither they nor the composers of myth and theology in other traditions could have imagined that the universe is 14 billion years old and vast, with millions of galaxies and billions of stars. Nor could they have imagined how the universe developed, how the sun and moon were formed and how life began to evolve, or how different strands of proto-humans developed with several extinctions until our own species appeared just 200,000 years ago.

Given their limited knowledge, the ancient thinkers defined a sacred dimension beyond the troubles of life and death. In Mahayana Buddhism, for example, ordinary people turned for aid and inspiration to many powerful Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, symbols of a transcendent wisdom and

peace beyond the earthly sufferings of impermanence and death, a world the pious have sought to escape.

In the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, people have long been taught to believe in a creator god who is transcendent and all-powerful, but who still is concerned with humans and available to them in worship and prayer.

All these traditions locate the sacred, the ultimate meaning of life, in an unchanging dimension that exists beyond the physical world. They gave people hope in both life and death, and personified deities to serve as models for their own lives. They provided moral teachings, patterns of proper behaviour for long-term social justice, peace and survival. These moral teachings have been seen as rooted in the will of God or the wisdom of the Buddha, revealed in sacred texts as social expressions of a transcendent order.

Nonetheless, in the light of what we now know about the history of life and the universe, the foundations of these traditional beliefs are no longer valid. This is particularly so in their conviction that an unchanging, absolute dimension of reality—heaven, or its equivalent—exists beyond the natural universe. There is simply no scientific evidence that such an unchanging dimension could exist. In fact, from the “big bang” 14 billion years ago to now, everything in the universe has been in a state of constant change, including the stars and galaxies themselves, which go through cycles of birth and death, coalescing from clouds of gas, burning for billions of years, then fading out or exploding in novae, to produce clouds of gas and debris from which new stars can form. Some constant principles can be found in nature, such as the speed of light, the conservation of energy and the force of gravity, but these are patterns of probability and self-organization, not imposed from outside. Within this context, natural events happen through chance and circumstance in an enormously complex way, depending on the life spans of thermonuclear reactions and collisions between stars and galaxies. The earth itself coalesced from clouds of gas, then was bombarded for millions of years by comets and asteroids to arrive at its present—and still changing—condition.

Chance and circumstance also determined the development of life on earth, beginning with the possibility that some organic molecules came here from space with the colliding asteroids and comets. Forms of life on earth have been almost wiped out several times due to volcanic eruptions, ice ages and asteroid impacts, including one 65 million years ago that threw up so much dust and debris that the dominant life form of the time, dinosaurs, could no longer survive. Among the forms of animals that survived were small primitive mammals which, freed of competition with dinosaurs, evolved into our ancient mammal ancestors and gave us the chance to exist.

Chance determines which of thousands of sperm will fertilize the egg that happens to be available at the right time to produce a particular individual; change happens constantly in the trillions

of cell that make up our bodies. As the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi understood 2400 years ago, “everything will change of itself, that is certain.” (1)

All this means that change is how things really are. Hence, there is no point in looking for some unchanging dimension somewhere else, and no possibility of finding it. It is an illusion created by fear of our own change and death.

This is contrary to thousands of years of well-intended teachings, but it need not be a cause for despair. Acceptance of change can bring us back to our real nature and our deep connections with everything else in the universe. As some forms of Chinese Buddhist philosophy realized centuries ago, the process of change is itself the absolute, a realization that can bring a deep sense of joy. Even before that the *Yijing* put it well: “Therefore it is the order of the Changes that the superior man devotes himself to and that he attains tranquillity by.” (2)

Human societies change constantly as well. Migrations of peoples, disease, warfare, struggles for power and justice, and personal ambitions ensure that nothing stays static for long. Nevertheless, some things in nature change so slowly that they are perceived as permanent: stellar constellations, the arcs traced by the sun, moon and planets, the changes of the seasons, the locations of mountains and seas, all seem unchanging. Ancient civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, China and elsewhere thought these things proved that order and constancy were natural conditions and applied them to human society and government. In this way social rules were understood as expressions of cosmic order. This is understandable, because it is hard to build a stable social order on a vision of constant change. We sense this same need in our own social, economic and political institutions and in our own lives and families.

There is, however, an inherent danger in this perspective. Social institutions that have been appropriate at one time may become instruments of control and oppression if carried on unchanged. We need to remember that in the long term nature just is. Our faulty perceptions of its patterns do not provide comic justification for our social traditions. We need to maintain some form of stable social structure without letting it become rigid and oppressive.

This same understanding applies to religious traditions, which attempt to stop time and change with claims that they are based on a self-defined, absolute and unchanging dimension of reality. But in fact there is only one world and one reality, and we are in it and part of it. These traditions of authority from beyond the world have made some useful contributions, but they have also led to a terrible self-righteousness that justifies attacks on other traditions and people. These traditions also divert attention away from preserving life and the world, and focus it on concerns produced by their own imaginations, long solidified by tradition.

We know that our universe is even more complex and beautiful than ancient seers could have possibly imagined. It was not created for us, but somehow, against all odds, we have appeared

within it, which is an incomparable wonder and mystery. Though science is discovering new planets around other stars, we are, as far as we know now, the only beings capable of fully developed speech and abstract, analytical thought in this universe. This means that we are the mind of the universe. There is no other. Our responsibility is to think on behalf of the world, as the Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming realized 500 years ago:

We know then, in all that fill heaven and earth there is but this clear intelligence
... My clear intelligence is the master of heaven and earth and spiritual beings. If heaven is deprived of my clear intelligence, who is going to look into its height? If earth is deprived of my clear intelligence, who is going to look into its depth? (3)

We do not yet understand in detail how the amazing development of human consciousness took place, but it is based on the fact that we are made, literally, of star dust. In sober reality, we are cosmic beings.

We humans have a colour-detecting pigment in our eyes called *rhodopsin*, which has also been found in algae, one of the most primitive plants. This means that we are genetically related to algae and to every other form of life that has evolved since algae appeared long ago, and reminds us that this world is the source of our lives. It is our only home. The one absolute truth we should all be able to agree on is that everything we know or can know depends on this world for its existence. It is irrelevant that the world was not created specifically for us, because the marvellous fact is that we are here anyway, to think, work and enjoy.

With this in mind, we must think again about ethics in an attempt to clarify practical rules for living in a universe of constant change, and do it without mystification, without recourse to a supposed realm of authority beyond the world. Chinese Confucian philosophers came close to doing this, but they still postulated a permanent principle of order, *li*, that is present both in the universe and in us, an idea similar to the old Greek and Hellenistic concept of *logos*, the rational principle of all things. European philosophers like Hume and Kant have tried to base ethics on reason alone.

For us, however, the place to begin is our intimate connection with the impermanent, changing universe and all its forms of life.

As the Mahayana Buddhists realized long ago, this shared impermanence provided the basis for an ethic of universal compassion through identification with the “sufferings of all beings.” We are all travelling together through space, we are all genetically related and dependent on each other for survival. From this, we can build on the principle that “good” is what protects and fosters life and earth, and “bad” is what damages and destroys them. We can build a modern structure of ethics on this foundation, while selecting the best from the ethical traditions of the past, such as

Jewish justice, Christian love, Buddhist compassion and Confucian righteousness. All human traditions are our heritage, and we have the right and obligation to learn from them.

Finally, what does all this mean for ideas about god and death? We no longer have to choose between a traditional idea of god and a completely secular point of view. We do not need to remain trapped in the false dichotomy between faith and nihilism. We can find a sacred dimension in this world itself.

Those who still want to talk about god can do so, as long as their discussion takes into account the way the world really is. Some theologians have long understood the term god to refer to the underlying reality of the world or the process by which it has come to be; Vancouver's own Sallie McFague is a good example of such thinkers. Theologians might consider god as either a personified symbol of the sacred dimension in the world, or that he/she is limited in knowledge and power, struggling, making mistakes, learning as the universe unfolds, a god that is also a part of change. For Christians, the image of Jesus suffering and dying could provide a start.

A determined theist might still see god behind the beauty and complexity of life, in which case the universe would be a vast experiment. But for me, all this is too complicated and really unnecessary; the world does not need to be so embellished. Why not adopt a simpler interpretation of the cosmic *Dao* or *Way*, humble and unobtrusive, but the source and order of all life, present in us and universe at the same time? We need an alternative paradigm for how to live as moral persons with a new sense of what is most precious and sacred based on the way we know things really are, to make more explicit the principles by which many already live. This paradigm is based on scientific discoveries going back at least 150 years to the work of Charles Darwin and the great geologists, physicists, astronomers and biologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The meaning of life does not come from the outside, but can be found in the human task of thinking and caring for the world. In sum, it is long past time for us to accept who we are and where we are, affirm this world as our only home, be glad we are alive, and get on with it!

As to death, it can be a terrible thing, particularly if family or friends die young, violently or unjustly. We are fortunate if we share close and loving relationships to help bear the pain. But in the larger perspective death has always been a natural part of life, and necessary for the process of evolution. Zhuangzi was way ahead of us in his statement, "Therefore, the reason why I appreciate life, is because I also appreciate death." (4) We all want to stay alive as long as possible, but whatever immortality we have will depend on our family and friends and on what we contribute to the ongoing flow of life and knowledge. To Confucians the options were either to "leave behind a fragrance for a hundred generations," or to "leave a stench for 10,000 years." (5) Those are our options now as well. The choice is ours to help make this precious world a better place.

Notes

1. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, Translated by Burton Watson, New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1968, p. 182.
2. *The I Ching or Book of Changes The Richard Wilhelm Translation Rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes Bollingen Series XIX, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press 1950. Revised 1961, 1967, 1968, 1969, p.289.*
3. *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, edited and translated by Wing Tsit-chan, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1963, P. 690.
4. *Chuang Tzu*, Watson translation, pp. 180 and 185.
5. Huang Yen-kai, ed., *Dictionary of Chinese Idiomatic Phrases*, Taiwan, Tung-hai ch'u-pan she, 1967, p. 464.

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