

# Harmony in Four Dimensions

## *The Cairo Lecture—January 2010*

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There is a saying attributed to the prophet Muhammad, “seek knowledge even if it is in China”. With such encouragement I take my text from the Analects of Confucius where there is a pregnant phrase “seek harmony not sameness”.

Towards the end of last year there was a remarkable exchange, on the web site of a London newspaper, between two writers who have spent years contemplating the perils of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Paul Kingsnorth asserted that “the civilisation we are part of is hitting the buffers at full speed and it is too late to stop it.” “The writing is on the wall for industrial society and no amount of ethical shopping or determined protesting is going to change that now.”

George Monbiot replied “Like you I have become ever gloomier about our chances of avoiding the crash you predict. For the past few years I have been almost professionally optimistic, exhorting people to keep fighting, knowing that to say there is no hope is to make it so. I still have some faith in our ability to make rational decisions based on evidence but it is waning.” It is of course possible to get locked into a competitive auction in doomsday scenarios. I believe there are problems to be

solved by technological and political action but at the same time I am convinced that it is vital to reflect on the real perils but also the promise of our times and in the light of these reflections to search for a more harmonious way of relating to God; to the creation; to our neighbours and to our deepest selves.

The perils and the promise of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been vividly presented to us in two symbols which have been revealed to the generations born after the Second World War and to no previous generation in the same way – the cloud and the globe.

The cloud which haunts our world is obviously the mushroom cloud of destruction which followed on our success in splitting the atom. But we also live in a cloud of potential. Much data is already stored “in the cloud” in cyber space and the switch to cloud based services is just one of the innovations which is opening up possibilities of even more rapid and inexpensive communication in our wireless but connected world. The challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to develop the wisdom to use the power which the knowledge and discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have bequeathed to us.

The other symbol is the globe, seen sapphire blue and beautiful and photographed for the first time from outer space on Christmas Eve 1968. The promise is of a global consciousness which embraces all living beings and the whole earth in compassion and neighbour love. The peril lies in the ambition of those who are wealthy and powerful now to entrench a global hegemony for ever.

In the Hebrew Scriptures there is a haunting passage in which Moses who has himself been denied entry into the promised land, addresses the children of Israel as they prepare to pass over Jordan, “I call heaven and earth to record this day that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing therefore choose life, that both thou and they seed may live.” [Deuteronomy XXX: 19]

It is always a time of decision and never more so than now. Lethargy is the legacy of a collapse of hope. It is a blasphemy

and a betrayal of our children to pray the prayer “Lord just let it last my time.”

But the perils are obvious enough. They are well summarised in Lord Rees’s recent book entitled in the US - “Our Final Hour”, but published in the UK under the somewhat less alarming title of “Our Final Century”. Martin Rees says that the omission of the question mark was a publisher’s error but the scenario he paints is indeed sobering.

The conjunction of the availability of lethal information via the internet with the apocalyptic vision of deranged individuals is just one of the dangers that face us. One of the consequences we can see all around us in London is a vast increase in intrusive surveillance.

There is also the reality of environmental degradation and the mess we are making of our world. Bishops are often accused of talking rubbish but recently as part of the City of London Festival I was given the rare opportunity to address the subject of rubbish head on under the title of “*Out of the Wasteland*”.

In a throw away culture nothing is designed to last and we have junk food and junk mail; junk and spam all calculated to appeal to our most superficial cravings.

Looking further afield we now know that the biggest “landfill” site of all is in the Pacific Ocean where a continent of plastic soup, the Eastern and Western Garbage Patches cover an area equal to that of the United States.

There are clearly ethical and moral problems associated with the way we waste the world but there is also a spiritual dimension.

In a famous analysis of the essence of the modern project, Max Weber pointed to the differentiation of what he called “the cultural value spheres” and the way in which art, morals and science have been left free to pursue their explorations by their own lights and undisturbed by intrusions from other spheres.

This kind of fragmentation is fundamental to the modern project.

Spirituality has also been captive to this compartmentalised world and in particular has largely declared a truce with science on the grounds of mutual irrelevance. The result has been an explosion of knowledge and an increase in power over nature but this has brought us to a time when we are being impelled by the logic of our own researches to resume the search for a holistic wisdom capable of reconnecting the “cultural value spheres” to one another. **We need a harmony in our relations with four dimensions; with God; with the creation; with our neighbours and with our deepest selves.** This is not the kind of examination where it is possible just to answer one or two questions – these relationships are all interconnected.

The need for a more holistic wisdom is nowhere more obvious than in our response to the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation. Ecology, as a word, is itself a relatively new coinage and a witness to the need to find a more holistic way of describing the challenge that we face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We are haunted by the question posed by T.S.Eliot, poet and churchwarden in one of the choruses from his drama *The Rock*:

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

Behold I show you a mystery. We have a great deal of knowledge about the facts, the causes and effects of climate change and environmental degradation but it seems to be hard to translate this knowledge into the degree of awareness which transforms our way of being in the world; the awareness which generates energy for the profound changes which are needed in the way we live now.

Prophecy should not be confused with strident talk about matters only dimly understood. It must be informed by the best possible science and history.

Consideration of the facts however leads us rapidly to the conclusion that the challenges we face are bound up with our way of being in the world and the character of our awareness. Philosophical and social\spiritual changes have combined to widen the divorce between the human observer and the web of life in which we are, in reality, participants with dire consequences.

In reality we are, as human beings, participants in an animated web of life but we have come to regard ourselves as little gods licensed to exploit matter for our own commodity in a theatre of purely human willing. Dominance has been substituted for connectedness in our relation to the universe. The human being has become the humiliator of the earth.

This shift has deep roots in the cultural history of the West. In 1486 at the age of 23 Pico della Mirandola composed his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* for a gathering of scholars in Rome.

Count Pico imagines God addressing himself to the newly created Adam thus - "We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honour, as though *the maker and moulder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.*"

A later source for the modern self is the philosophy of Rene Descartes who frankly confessed that the motive behind his method of reasoning was to make man "maitre and possesseur de la terre". So it has proved.

There has been a shift of consciousness which has overwhelmed proper inhibitions on our innate tendency to treat the world in an exploitative way. This has contributed to the human factors which lie behind climate change and environmental degradation. Surreptitiously we have become gods but we also experience groundlessness and a lack of nourishing coherence. Alienation is the result of the splitting of the self from nature and cosmos.

We waste and rubbish and treat planet earth in a destructive god-forsaken way because we see things in a destructive, god-forsaken way. But we have also recently begun to turn this way of seeing on ourselves. No longer is there the huge and vaulting confidence of the Victorian atheists who hailed human liberation from the tutelage and tyranny of God as the dawn of new age of progress and prosperity. We have begun to suspect that all the talk about love and justice is a mask with certain genetic and evolutionary advantages for a cunning and rapacious animal. Behind the rhetoric of humanism, there is a modern lurking suspicion that we are little more than “rapacious self interested exploiters whose success depends on converting all around us [other people, relationships, resources] into commodities and consumables.” [Jonathan Porritt] No wonder there is despondency.

Standing on Dover Beach towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Matthew Arnold pictured the sea of faith ebbing, “retreating to the breath of the night wind down the vast edges drear and naked shingles of the world”. The tide was going out but perhaps unnaturally far, leaving fish stranded and the sea floor exposed. One child on a Thai holiday beach read the sign correctly and saved her family. Run she shouted because such a recession of the tide is a sign of an approaching Tsunami.

In a cosmopolitan place like London, a world in a city, there are many signs of increasing turbulence and of the spiritual tsunami that is building among the very youthful population of the megalopolises of the world.

In a way that bewilders members of yesterday’s Anglo-American avant garde it is already clear that the four to five billion people in the world, who follow some kind of spiritual path, are not going to conform to what until recently was seen to be the inevitable consequence of modernisation - that is the relegation of religion to the margins of life.

It is another sign of a sea change that the editorial team at the Economist has decided that the reality of the contemporary world cannot be described without reporting its religious news. The Editor has recently co-authored a book with the provocative title “God is Back”. Five years ago ink would not

have been wasted on something which was seen to have no value in understanding the daylight world.

In London we are fortunate enough to have a sustained relationship with some of the poorest communities in the world in Mozambique. As so often is the case the poor have been our teachers. We have been alerted to the need for conversion to a way of living wisely which leads to progressive transformation. Conversion means turning from the attempt to satisfy our hunger and thirst by consumption alone. Consumers are called to grow into citizens and communicants, beings in communion with the divine creation; then perhaps we shall know the joy which comes with being a true contemplative.

Too much ecological concern seemed to be tinged with a certain joylessness. Christian asceticism is not so much an invitation to be measured for a hair shirt as a re-discovery of rhythm; that balance between feasting and fasting; Sabbath and work which brings joy. If all is Carnival with no ensuing Lent then the result is simply sickness.

Science helps us in this transformation of awareness. The man-centered and reason dominated world view of the Enlightenment, to which theology contributed not a little, has been challenged by Darwinism which, whatever its other reductionist tendencies, has returned human beings to their organic place in nature. Darwin whose bicentenary we celebrated last year has helped to restore the perspective which informs the symbolism of Genesis II in which God forms "adam", the earth creature out of the very dust – "ha'adam".

We have to relearn that wisdom and meaning in life begin with humility and that they grow with a progressive diminution of egotism and the discovery that serving others is the road to freedom and fulfillment. The more you let go of self the more you grow in soul. You cannot live in this way by mere wishful thinking there has to be spiritual practice, daily prayer at least, prayer and meditation which dispels illusions, together with just and generous living.

We are creatures of the dust – star dust in fact as both Genesis and Darwin affirm. We are called to be viceroys in the creation, but we are still participants in this animated universe. The habit of viewing everything as an object, and as a commodity to be exploited to realise our desires, both drains our world of life and drama, and scars the face of the earth.

Recently in another sign of hope, Lord May, a former President of the Royal Society and Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government, a self proclaimed atheist who says that he experienced an “inverse epiphany” at the age of 11, suggested that “God” might be needed to evoke an appropriate response to the ecological challenges currently facing humanity.

It is after all a perfectly reputable scientific way of proceeding to posit a hypothesis involving the existence of an unseen entity without which it is difficult to understand how the system being studied actually coheres. The “Higgs boson” is an example of just such an entity in the science which is being explored in the super collider in Geneva.

Our country cannot simply be described as religious but Lord May’s remarks point to the possibility that we are also entering a post secular period in which our perspective on the world is being refashioned in response to contemporary economic and environmental challenges and in which the search for harmony; a more holistic understanding of reality is rendering the rather flatland, reductionist descriptions of the recent past increasingly unsatisfying.

I am not of course suggesting that there is a direct correlation between the atheism of individuals and their behaviour which is often in my experience, marked by remarkable altruism. Those who find it impossible to entertain the idea of God often disbelieve in a god in whom it would be folly to repose any confidence. It must be confessed, for example, that the atheists of the beginning of the modern period had a point. God seemed to be the underwriter of regimes throughout Europe where the many were compelled to bend to the will of the one who ruled. The God who supported tyranny was of course very far from the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus

Christ but atheism appeared to be the gateway to political and personal freedom.

That of course was then and our situation now is very different. Many people as heirs of the Enlightenment which deposed the ancien regime throughout Europe have nevertheless clung to the hope that we could have Abrahamic ethics of a kind which have profound resonances with ethics derived from other faith traditions without belief in God or at least that which transcends the human will. Individuals surviving on the spiritual capital of the civilizations from which they emerge may well espouse the highest values but the persuasiveness of these values is always eroding in the absence of the spiritual relationship and energy which brought them to birth. The sheer irrationality of ascribing unique dignity to human beings in the absence of the God who created them so, gradually colonises the mind.

One of the many virtues of the 19<sup>th</sup> century atheist Friedrich Nietzsche, was that he hated the Christian faith for what it was – a devotion to the ethics of compassion. He hated the Christian faith for what he saw as its enfeebling solicitude for the weak, the outcast and the infirm. Nietzsche knew that the disappearance of the Christian God would lead to a new set of values.

We have witnessed in the experiments of the political religions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Communism and National Socialism, attempts to explore just what those values might be in practice.

But the serious consequences of atheism are still largely hidden from our contemporaries and indeed we are all caught up in a society shaped by the sovereignty of human willing and choice untrammelled by any higher good. Increasing concern about the condition of our wasteland is among the contemporary signs that Lord May is right to detect a shift into a post secular mode in which our perspective on the world will be revised.

It is undeniable there has been a certain loss of

nerve among spiritual people and certainly in the Church there has even been an excessive desire to entertain rather than insist on a radically different way of life. But now is the time when we must with seriousness explore the consequences of the great crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: an interlocking crisis in which denying God; despoiling the earth and diminishing humanity are an anti-trinity which we are called upon to unmask and against which we are called together to struggle.

How shall we develop the wisdom to use the power which the discoveries and the knowledge of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have bequeathed to us?

This distinction between knowledge and wisdom is of course very ancient. In the myth of the Paradise Garden we are presented with two trees - the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. The fruit of the Tree of Life was true knowledge of the divine creation. This is what the Biblical tradition regards as Wisdom. "Wisdom is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her." Proverbs III:18.

What of the Tree of Knowledge? This is knowledge wrenched from its source, which according to the first book of Enoch "caused much bloodshed on the earth". The knowledge from the second tree is partial and fragmented. It is knowledge only of a god-forsaken world in which human beings themselves have assumed the role of gods. In the process of course they have discovered that abstracted from the Creator and Source of Life, their destiny is death.

Wisdom is a harmonious way of being in the world, aware of the deep structure of life, respectful of other beings, taking life, not for granted, but with thanksgiving to its Author.

The modern project of growth without limits and with no end in view beyond the process itself arises, in the perspective of the Abrahamic religions, from choosing the wrong tree. We have lost the knowledge of wisdom in the pursuit of fragmented knowledge.

The supreme objective values which dominate this sublunary world profit; power and prowess. Max Weber's famous prophecy – “no one knows who will live in this cage in the future or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise or there will be a great re-birth of old ideas and ideals, or if neither, mechanised petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive self importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development it might well be truly said “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” [Quoted p 33, Richard Tarnas - *Cosmos and Psyche*.]

The question for us is how to transcend our strange and unique modern commitment to restrict all meaning and purposive intelligence to ourselves and our refusal to ascribe these in any way to that from which we have emerged.

Everyone here belongs to particular families and faith traditions but each of us might consider contracting with say seven friends to refresh our practice of wise living. As part of our re-orientation we ought deliberately to look for others outside our own immediate circle in a spirit of generosity and openness and in the conviction that we all need encouragement to live more closely to the ideals we profess. This is the spirit of undogmatic confidence and yea saying which will bring salvation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We ought to have an especial care to explore and use the cloud for the sake of the globe in order to establish portals of wisdom through which people all over the world can enter into real and fruitful relations.

The saddest words in any language are “it's too late”. But contrary to the prophets of doom it may be that the night is far spent and the day is at hand.

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