

THE BIG PICTURE: Nature, God, Church & Self

How we understand ourselves

Cultural assumptions and presumptions are under radical scrutiny for the roles they play in (mis)understanding ourselves and causing eco-social dead ends. Our cultural past has to be measured against new knowledge; some assumptions and presumptions have to be not only challenged but have to go for they are undoing us and wasting ecologies. Even certain understandings of Church and self are no longer credible or satisfying.

At this time humankind is brought up short by the cumulative crisis of human making. Ecologies, human institutions, families, communities and long held values are failing, and not just coincidentally. Under these circumstances how should humankind move forward? A reasonable start is to reconsider values, understandings of God, nature, self and relations with others.

Today's world crises didn't just happen they are caused by human misbehavior, of which we are sometimes aware and sometimes unaware. Each generation must answer for itself how it fits in the "big picture", based on information passed on to it and on circumstances in which it finds itself. In the whole human experience, in global life experience, the consequences of human excess and wrongdoing have never been so radically consequential. Cultural misunderstandings and massive wrongdoing call for new insight, new analysis and synthesis of evolutionary history, of culture and life on Earth which can expose errors and misconceptions and point humankind in new directions.

How do we teach and learn self-understanding? We start out very much conformed to age-old habits of upbringing. The skeletons of cultural history are the bones passed on to us and upon which we must by our own living grow the flesh that makes us human. Creation and evolution are ongoing realities and tasks belonging to each generation.

1. Creation and Evolution, Faith and Reason

What do we know about ourselves, for sure? We are born individually of a woman and a man. Whether male or female, we are female/ male characterized, physically and psychically — everyone different, but alike. We come into this world under the laws of nature and are at all times accountable to the laws of nature. We are graced by nature in body and spirit. "Grace supposes nature as faith supposes reason", John Courtney Murray, SJ. Female and male, we are endowed in faith and reason; by reason of essential interdependence, we are grace, and threat, to one another.

We know that we have personal and social needs, and that these complement each other when our lives are rightly ordered. We also know that impulses toward personal self-interest can blind us to other-interest, to social responsibilities, to our insensitivity for nature.

We know that human life has not been forever; that we have a history; that we have evolved over time with impact on other life; that the life of each of us is with impact on future life. We know that our role in life's history is characterized by the graces of spirit, by the way we relate intentionally with nature and other life.

We know that dominion appetites and instincts to self-reproduce make us insensitive to others and blind to nature's limits in handling human overreach. We know that the unrestrained passions and appetites of prolix humankind are causing irreversible ecological disaster, the destruction of species, global heating.

Our cultural overreach is blowing back at us. The expectations we put on nature over-extend nature. We must wake up to our destruction of nature and confront ourselves. Where have we gone wrong? Is religion helping us? Is our belief in God having any moral effect in our lives? In the face of history, culture, reason and faith we must ask ourselves "who are we? Who is God? What do we believe? It's time that we probe our "within" and "without". Where are our understandings misinformed? What "god" do I really serve?

New analysis and synthesis, in the light of evolutionary consciousness, can give us an entirely new understanding of God, of ourselves and of nature. It is in our self-interest that we rethink what is important in the big picture and recover ethical understandings that serve us personally and socially. In our pretenses of being godlike we have come to believe arrogantly, idolatrously, as if "like God" we can dominate nature with impunity.

2. God Consciousness

The God-consciousness that inhabits us is of cultural and personal construction. Not surprisingly, human constructions are biased by self-interest, misunderstandings and partial knowledge. The biases of self-interest cause us to fixate in ideas that serve self-interest. Perfectly good and necessary understandings that work at one time may be unworkable at another time. In fact, because of changed circumstances they may bring about our undoing. Fixations in outdated ideologies become what are called "isms".

The attachment of "ism" to a word means that it has been overworked and objectified to the point of being problematic. While some truth may attach to it, so does falsehood because of exaggeration, over-use and misuse; for example, the words "creationism" and "evolutionism". Proponents of one or the other hold tightly to their preferred ideologies and dismiss and discredit the other. Also, consider the words "theism" and "atheism". Theists believe in God, atheists do not; each tends to be dismissive of the other and closed to the rationality of the other.

It is usually true that every ideology has some truth in it and some rationality about it. In every ideology there is some right and some wrong; the sensible, sensitive and rational way of dealing with conflicting ideologies is to be open to discuss them; one's own understandings and the other person's may be broadened by mutual openness. Openness can lead to "both/ and" understandings and mitigate sharp rifts that are uncompromisingly "either/ or". Because creation and evolution are ongoing in nature we should be open to both.

One might wonder how one comes to God-consciousness. It happens by processes that are "from within" and "from without". Traditional theology (cultural history) passes on the understanding that the revelation of God has occurred from the "without", by divine contact from the top-down, what is a view of creationism. Theistic evolution sees the revelation of God as occurring through natural processes "from within", that is, in the evolving processes of complexity-consciousness and advanced self-understanding.

The premise of evolution theology is very different from creation theology's premise. All existence, all consciousness belongs to continuity processes of evolving energy/ matter. The theory is that all origins go back to the point density expansion of the big bang. The subtle and complex developments of energy/ matter are refinements, "perfections" beyond harsh and less developed forms of energy/ matter interrelationships. The "perfecting" of evolution might be thought of as an intelligence-seeking process. The successful iterations of processing add to the subtlety of intelligence. "Intelligence" is discerned in forms of magnetic resonances and electrical responses. Migration instincts of birds, fish and other fauna are kinds of natural intelligence processes. The perfecting of human intelligence is by way of thinking, perfecting and correlating thinking, what is a process of analysis and synthesis. (The *method of evolution*, "Cogitata perficiendo, cogitando sic perfecta", *perfecting the process of thinking by perfecting thoughts*).

And so it is with God-consciousness, an insight of divinity ever open to rational expanse by way of experience and correlated reasoning, of learning from accommodation and successful symbiosis. Consciousness, like all life, like cosmic expansion, acquires from within and opens outwardly. It's the way the universe works.

3. Church and Self

The Second Vatican Council proclaimed a New Church "inside" (ad intra) and "outside" (ad extra). The Council's First Constitution detailed the soul of the Church, its inner spirituality as the "light of the people" (*Lumen gentium*). The Council's Fourth Constitution addressed the outer working of the Church, the role of the whole people in experiencing and enabling the divine graces of "joy and hope" for all. (*Gaudium et spes*).

The "within" (soul, function, spirituality) and the "without" (body, form, secularity) of Church inhabit the whole people, hierarchy and laity. This understanding of Church is a leap forward from the militant, triumphant Church of Trent and Vatican I. Vatican II Church proclaims itself a community of believers advancing God's reign of love on Earth.

The "grace" of Church is the grace of nature, what is love, inspired by the presence of divinity consciousness, the sign of God present. In Godly service to love's spread, the presence of God is revealed and the reign of love (God) advanced.

Western religious culture (the Abrahamic inheritance) advanced on the belief that all of nature was "hands-on" created by God in pristine perfection, all in perfect harmony until Adam and Eve failed the test of obedience and disrupted everything. In the Genesis account God gave two mandates, "increase and multiply" and "do not eat the Middletree fruit". The Original Sin of consuming life's ecozoic fabric is a sin very much with us, and we don't have another garden in which to escape. Evolution-consciousness very much focuses on the human predicament of over-consumption and blindness (dominion/ creation ideology/ politics) toward personal/ corporate responsibility.

As Church understands itself so must the individual person understand him/ herself. The people have the same purposes and objectives in life as Church has. Church is People-facilitator. The realm(s) of the spiritual and the secular are the same realm; spiritual and secular specify and identify each other, for together they are unity/ reality. The secular

structure is the material means of spiritual functioning, even as spiritual functioning is the means of secular structure.

Church is a community of believers who act on belief informed in experience and reason. The Christian people mean to be a people committed to the expression of love for one another. Church and the cohesive community of people mean to be one and the same. Authenticity is the same for people as it is for Church. The authenticity of the people supposes the authenticity of Church even as the authenticity of the Church supposes the authenticity of the people.

Morality is conscience that prevails in the working of the spiritual/ secular world. Secularity cannot claim a morality different from what spirituality claims. The “prophets of profit” cannot credibly claim a morality that is different from the morality of the prophets of social justice. Exploiting nature in self-interest and profiteering on life’s universal means is a modern version of the Original Sin and ego-idolatry.

For good reason, some believe that the most important accomplishment of Vatican II was the redefining of ecclesiology away from seeing itself as institutional, hierarchical and juridical (the Kingdom of God on Earth) to the understanding of being the whole people of God advancing the divine grace of love. In coming to understand Church and its purposes we come to understand the purpose of our lives. Self understanding is rightly modeled after community Church understanding.

The Church of the Third Millennium, the Vatican II Church, doesn’t claim to be militant, triumphal or judgmental (as did Trent and Vatican I) rather it is conscious of people together working to bring to all the common and generous graces of divinity provisioned in the Sacrament of Natural Order. The Church of Vatican II reaches out openly, a welcoming community, conscious of its spiritual/ secular nature and conscionable purpose of communal harmony, the ever-present working of the Holy Spirit.

4. Church’s Global Predicament

This is the Church’s global predicament: in the evolving universe, the energy (function) of every form is apt to the form. Dysfunction (failure) occurs with the mismatch of energy/ function and structure/ form. Evolution changes forms and functions; when they match, they are sustainable, when they don’t match, they disintegrate.

Roman Catholicism is bedeviled by its fixation in the static energy (Neo-Scholasticism) of the 2000 year old Static Worldview. As vehicles (forms) evolve, so does (must) the energy. With respect to theology, spirituality is its energy “ad intra” (Vatican II, “*Lumen gentium*”), and with respect to functioning in the real world, ecclesiology is Church “ad extra” (Vatican II, “*Gaudium et spes*”). The “within energy” has to be apt for the “without function” if Church is to be sustainable and effective.

Neo-Scholasticism today is a steam engine fitted in a rocket-ready structure. The rocket will never get off the ground until it is fitted with an apt engine; such engine is the open consciousness of the Evolutionary Worldview (Liberation Theology). The “ad extra” vehicle of modern Church may be an automobile, but fitting it with a steam engine is really clumsy. Vatican II recognized the problem of Church dysfunction “ad intra” and “ad

extra”, and urgently stated the need for new “analysis and synthesis” to upgrade the Church engine (spirituality). [Constitution IV, *Gaudium et spes*, Introduction, No.5]

The steamroller engines of monarchy are not apt for the Third Millennium culture. The energy/ structure mismatch of the monarchical model continues to smash the delicate structures of personal conscience, the elemental bonds of communal cohesion. The trust bonding of personal conscience is the cohesive power of interpersonal relationships. Cultural divisions and corruptions of classes based on belief, gender, race, ethnicity and status do not allow for communal cohesion and sustainable culture.

Every person is born with original gifts, with unique charisms. Affirmative living (conscionable symbiosis) is about discovering and developing intuitional charisms in service to common wellbeing. Personal intuitions are the ready inspirations of autopoiesis, the means of cultural enlightenment, the source of betterment and personal/social fulfillment. The human person, like the divine, is characteristically creative. The potentials of originality become original in the endeavor of the creative person.

http://www.americamagazine.org:80/content/article.cfm?article_id=11565

**The autopoietic persona is challenged in the “Poetree Trilogies”:
the NOVOGENESIS Trilogy is about evolving Cosmology;
the METAGENESIS Trilogy is about evolving Philosophy; and
the THEOGENESIS Trilogy is about evolving Theology.**

<http://www.evolution101.org/The%20POETREE%20Trilogies.pdf>

<http://www.secondenlightenment.org/Poetry%20Poetree,%20Organic%20Sacrament.pdf>

Vatican II has put in place a cohesive Church model suitable for global humanity. Conscionousness, affirmative conscience, and civil/ religious analyses and syntheses facilitate the redoubling of cultural commitment and communal cohesion — in these are true “joy and hope”.

The engines of consciousness are faith and reason. Faith is collective wisdom genetically programmed in flesh and consciousness by nature and nurture. Reason is self-reflective consciousness weighing ongoing experience against the grounding of faith. The cumulative understandings of reason bear upon daily choices, which motivate us day in and day out. Ultimately, we decide the rationality of faith and reason that controls our consciousness, the consciousness that inhabits our actions and judgments.

There are strong institutional pressures that work to control our thinking from childhood on up. Not everyone successfully escapes mind controls imposed by institutions. (Some despotic bishops are so captured in imperial intuitions that their simplistic expectation of people is to obey, pay and pray.) The role of institutions is to facilitate the processing of self-reflective consciousness, not to dominate and control. Dominion theology and hierarchical (imperial) politics intend to dominate and control; and because this atavistic regime is so deeply engrained, people find it difficult to get out from under it, to engage their own rationality and exercise their own consciousness and conscience.

Dominion theology and hierarchical control are bankrupt ideologies. Institutions that are premised in this dying mindset are imploding all around us. Spirituality and secularity belong together; without the conscionable culture of spirituality, secularity is left to its

own devices of ego-centric purposes that go astray for lack of social consciousness/ conscience.

The institutions of society and communitarian rationality (conscience) have to discover each other and pursue mutual accommodation, for, communitarian conscience is the apt engine for people personally and for their institutions. Church needs to fit seamlessly into the communitarian schemes of personal/ social living.

People are primary to all institutions; people-conscience and -rationality are primary to institutional. Institutions must adapt to and evolve with the conscionable faith/ rationality of the people. Admittedly, this thinking departs radically from the Church's accustomed way of thinking.

Reference:

Richard P. McBrien, "*The Church, the Evolution of Catholicism*", copyright © 2008, HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022