VALUES AND WORLDVIEWS FOR AN ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION

By Herman Greene

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To talk about values and worldviews for an ecological civilization in one presentation is a tall order. I’ll take this on by speaking to you about some elements of this that are most important to me.

I want to begin by saying I have been greatly influenced by the work of Thomas Berry. There are very different understandings of what an ecological civilization would be. In sustainability some talk about the approaches of the three Sachs:

- Frist, Wolfgang Sachs of the Wuppertal Institute in Germany – He has written books like *Planetary Dialectics* and *Fair Future*. He is a critic of both conventional development and conventional sustainable development.
- Second, Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University – He is a trained macroeconomist, was an important adviser to Russia and other former states of the Soviet Union on privatization and the development of market economies after the end of the Cold War. He now is the leader of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and is perhaps the most prominent leader in conventional sustainable development. He advocates applying all of the capacities of the industrial economy to eradicate poverty and realize justice and sustainability.
- Third, Goldman Sachs – Goldman Sachs, of course, is not an individual. It is a global investment bank and represents conventional development, capital markets, and globalization.

Thomas Berry is of the Wolfgang Sachs variety or maybe better one could say that Wolfgang Sachs is of the Thomas Berry variety. Berry wrote three key books:

- *The Dream of the Earth*;
- *The Universe Story* (co-authored with Brian Swimme); and

I highly recommend them to you.

I spend some time on the three Sachs and on Thomas Berry because one’s values for an ecological civilization depend in part on where one is coming from. All of the Sachs have a role to play in this transition, and I am involved in all three; but my dominant orientation is based on the Wolfgang Sachs/Thomas Berry view. This view is that if we are to have a viable human
future and a flourishing Earth community, fundamental change is needed that goes beyond reforming our present industrial civilization. Rather than taking a problem-solution approach, it takes a breakdown-breakthrough approach.

There are two other great influences on my thinking:

- One is Alfred North Whitehead – He was a philosopher and his philosophy is popularly known as “process philosophy,” though he described it as “organic philosophy.” An organism is a living being. All of its component parts are related and work together. An organism is alive, has experiences, is moved by feelings, and has intentions. Whitehead wrote that the whole universe should be understood by analogy to living organisms. At the broadest reach, the universe as a whole is organic, and within this are many societies each of which functions organically. At the bottom of the universe, Whitehead wrote, there are minute events, which are more like experiences or energy bursts than hard objects. Like pixels on a TV screen, the universe is perpetually refreshing itself through these minute events, and all together are creating and re-creating the world we know. I like to think of the universe developing like a grand symphony with zillions of related notes being played.

- The other is E. Maynard Adams - He was Chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From the time of Descartes there has been a dualistic understanding of the world that separates (i) humans with their capacities to think, imagine, and experience, from (ii) nature understood as inert matter, mechanistically developing solely by reason of antecedent causation. Adams called this understanding of nature “scientific naturalism,” which he thought was prevalent in the modern mind. Scientific naturalism, he wrote, eliminated value and meaning concepts from the descriptive, explanatory framework of the universe. Adams argued, as Whitehead did, for a unified worldview in which the physical and the psychic were involved in some way in all aspects of the universe. Scientific naturalism begins with dead matter and tries to explain the human. Adams, and also Whitehead, began with human experience and asked what kind of universe could have such capacities. Beyond the foregoing, Adams offered a philosophical anthropology that I find unmatched.

The philosophies of Whitehead and Adams as well as the work of Berry have a bearing on what I will say about worldviews for ecological civilization.

Values for an Ecological Civilization

I have two primary offerings in the area of values for an ecological civilization. One concerns the transition to ecological civilization, and the other a set of values for an ecological civilization.

There are values that, in principle, don’t have a historical context. For example, “Always tell the truth,” in principle, applies to any historical period. In philosophy these are referred to as virtues or eternal, that is to say timeless, values. There is a role for virtues and virtue ethics, but
that is not the kind of values I will discuss here. I will discuss values needed in a new stage of civilization, ecological civilization.

Note, I said “stage of civilization.” I did so for ease of expression, but “stage” is a term somewhat at odds with ecological civilization. Stage is a static term, ecological civilization is dynamic, processual, ever-evolving reality. To talk about ecological civilization is to understand we are in a historical transition and to understand this transition fully is to know we will always be in transition—ecological civilization is not something to be arrived at, but something ever to be created. Indeed in this conference we involved in the process of creating it.

This transition has a macro, or overarching, aspect and it has a micro aspect. The macro aspect concerns the cumulative transition, the micro concerns the particular actions to be taken to bring about the macro transition. The conscious awareness of ecological civilization begins with the macro. Paul Raskin writes that we are in the planetary phase of civilization and he is correct. Thomas Berry wrote that from the earliest times in human history we have been acculturated into a microphase awareness of our place in the Earth system, yet we find ourselves now at a place where humans as a whole have a macrophase impact. Ecological civilization depends on this macrophase awareness.

Thomas Berry I believe offered the most radical assessment of this macro transition. He wrote that we are moving from the terminal Cenozoic era in Earth’s history to an emerging Ecozoic era. He wrote this because he believed we may be going through the sixth mass extinction in Earth’s history, but even more because he believed that Earth’s life systems could no longer function as they did over the last 65 million years of the Cenozoic era. When humans arrived on this planet they truly arrived in a Garden of Eden fed by fresh streams and air and abundant plant and animal species. Now few rivers have their natural flows, the ocean is acidifying, toxins and pollutants with very long lifetimes affect ecosystems, topsoil is eroding, deserts are spreading, more than 50% of Earth’s fresh water and biomass are dedicated to human use, and the climate is warming and changing. There are two possible outcomes of this, (i) the increasing degradation of Earth’s ecosystems and the decline of large animal species including humans, or (ii) an emerging Ecozoic era where humans have a conscious relationship with other life and life systems and live in a mutually enhancing way with them and with other humans.

Berry gave 14 Principles of the Ecozoic era. Here is one I find especially meaningful:

5. The entire pattern of functioning of Earth is altered in the transition from the Cenozoic to the Ecozoic era. The major developments of the Cenozoic took place entirely apart from any human intervention. In the Ecozoic, the human will have a comprehensive influence on almost everything that happens. While the human cannot make a blade of grass, there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless it is accepted, protected and fostered by the human. Our positive power of creativity in the natural life systems is minimal, while our power of negating is immense.
I believe the values for ecological civilization must be aligned with Berry’s vision of the Ecozoic era.

Here is a table of values for an ecological civilization.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUES FOR AN ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION</th>
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<td><strong>Macro</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
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<td>Knowing</td>
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<td><strong>Epistemological</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Ontological</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Ethical</strong></td>
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These values are meant to provide moral imperatives that support ecological civilization and are different from those that supported the industrial civilization of modernity. In ecological civilization, ecology and the related concept of community serve similar roles as progress and freedom in the modern period.

Ecology is the study of the interrelations of organisms and their environment. The overarching lesson of ecology is that we live in an evolving community of interdependent relationships. There can be no health for the individual unless there is health for the community on which the individual depends. The lessons of modernity, which emphasized the primacy of the well-being of the individual (including the importance of diversity and the self-organizing capacities of the individual) should not be forgotten, but a new emphasis on the well-being of the community, which extends to all humans, to other-than-human nature, and to future generations, is the guiding motif of ecological civilization.

The above table can be read horizontally or vertically. I’ll explain it both ways. Viewed vertically the first column emphasizes community, the second column emphasizes the integrating processes by which community and individual come into being, the third column concerns the individual.

I’ll discuss the particular values based on the horizontal. What humans have come to know, our science and more broadly our *Scientia* or knowledge, is the basis of modernity. We have used this knowledge to shape and control our world. In modern philosophy, epistemology, what we are capable of knowing has been of primary concern. The issues of modern epistemology are

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1 According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, epistemology means “The branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity.”
too large to cover here, but the values listed address its shortcomings. The knowledge of modernity is partial—not inclusive of all the peoples and cultures of the world, not inclusive of other-than-human beings, life systems or future generations, not inclusive of so-called secondary modes of knowing (qualities, feelings, somatic awareness). In an ecological civilization nothing can be left out, a value in our knowing is inclusiveness.

The second value in this row is interdependence. In modernity knowledge has stressed isolated individuals and events and when considering activity it has also tended to be studied in isolation from the whole. In ecological civilization, the knowledge of interdependent relationships is a value. Elements of knowledge that are supported by this value include top-down causation, systems thinking and consideration of how individual actions affect communities.

The third value in this row is appreciation. I had a difficult time finding a word to put here. I’m not satisfied with the “sound” of appreciation, but its definition I like very much. The American Heritage Dictionary defines appreciation as follows:

**Appreciate:**

1. To recognize the quality, significance, or magnitude of.
2. To be fully aware of or sensitive to; realize.
3. To be thankful or show gratitude for.
4. To admire greatly; value.
5. (Economics) To raise in value or price, especially over time.

If appreciation means this, what would our knowledge be like if our knowledge of individuals in community were grounded in appreciation?

With respect to the second row, as discussed in the next part of this talk, the ontology of modernity has an inherent set of values. Here are values implied in a process-relational ontology, which, also discussed in the next part, I believe is the ontology for an ecological civilization:

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<tr>
<th>Communion/Organism</th>
<th>Process/Creativity</th>
<th>Differentiation/Subjectivity</th>
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With respect to ethics, modernity stresses enlightened self-interest. Interrelationships are seen as competitive, and positions, both physical and mental, are understood as fixed and as only being moved by force. Rights of individuals come before responsibilities to communities. In indigenous communities preservation of the community is paramount. There is little sense of rights only obligations. When one errs, rather than punishing the individual, the effort is to bring that person back into the ways of the community. To be banned from the community, to become an outcast, is the ultimate punishment. Such an emphasis on community can become abusive, such as in authoritarian societies. We should not forget the values of the individualistic
ethics of modernity, but in ecological civilization there needs to be a move back to communal ethics.

**Worldviews and Ecological Civilization**

It is common to talk about worldviews. I recognize the value of the concept but first I want to criticize the common use of the term.

I think a more meaningful term than worldview is cosmology. One’s worldview is one’s understanding of the world and in a larger sense of the universe, and that’s cosmology. In the modern period cosmology has largely been reduced to physical cosmology, the kind of work that scientists do. Classically though cosmology was part of the branch of philosophy known as metaphysics. This kind of cosmology, that is to say philosophical cosmology, concerns the basic assumptions we make about the nature of the universe and the human role in it that can’t be proven or disproven by empirical observations alone yet they inform our investigations of the world and our actions.

Rémi Brague wrote an important book called *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*. In it he distinguishes cosmology from cosmography, our physical map of the Earth/universe, and cosmogony, the story of how things came to be. Though related to these other terms, the meaning of cosmology to Brague, “as is implied by the word logos, is not that of a simple discourse, but an account of the world in which a reflection on the nature of the world as a world [(as some kind of existing reality with common features throughout)] must be expressed.” Because it is reflexive, cosmology requires an experiencing subject—the human being—and “must therefore necessarily imply something like an anthropology.”

Brague gives a history of Western understandings of the universe. In the modern period, Brague wrote, “The image of the world that emerged from physics after Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton [was] of a confluence of blind forces, where there [was] no place for consideration of the Good.” The world was no longer a whole, but a result of disparate forces. Cosmology gave way to cosmography—the stars, for example, no longer reflected the order of heaven, an ethical model to which one was to adapt oneself, but lacked any significance until some new theory might account for the facticity of their existence. In the words of Nietzsche concerning the new astronomy, “‘Since the time of Copernicus man distances himself from the center, and moves toward X.’”

Cosmology also gave way to cosmogony, as a focus on theories to account for the origins of nature became more important than the truth expressed in it. To the extent that post-Copernican science revealed a truth about nature, it was of its moral indifference. “[Consequently,] cosmology lost its relevance in two ways . . . : on the one hand, its ethical value was simply neutralized as the cosmology was considered amoral; and on the other hand it was more seriously discredited as being immoral.” Further, humans appeared as no exception to the new laws of nature. Morality was reconceived, in the liberal movement, to emulate
amoral nature’s pursuit of self-interest as the way to the good; in various strains of existentialism, as a protest against nature’s indifference; or, in reactionary circles, as an “unworldly” adherence to traditional, ideological, or religious values, in the latter case, sometimes as a protest against modern science.

Thus, the “world,” the sense of cosmos, that came into being in antiquity and had endured through the medieval period gave way to “worldviews,” each of which was, in principle, equivalent in the light of modern scientific understandings that would validate none of them. “The long use of world to mean an object so patterned and unified as [to constitute] the geocentric kosmos” gave way to the term “universe” to mean the totality of things, whatever this may be, whether good or bad or ordered or chaotic. Further, from this acosmic vantage point, good was no longer understood to be in nature, it had to be introduced by humans “by force, by taking nature against the grain . . . inside the only realm that [was] within the scope of human action . . . the earth. Modern technology defines itself through the undertaking of domination, through a plan to become, according to the famous epigram of Descartes, the ‘master and possessor of nature.’”

I would like to develop this much more than I can today, but you will note two criticisms of the concept of worldview I have given above: (1) that the more comprehensive term is philosophical cosmology, and (2) that in the modern period worldviews have become relative, none of them validated by a universe that constitutes a cosmos.

To conclude this brief treatment of the subject, I want to advocate for a comprehensive worldview or cosmos within which the diverse worldviews and cultures may contribute to an ecological civilization. We need to become cosmic again. That is we need to move from the acosmic worldview of modernity that sees no meanings or values in nature to an understanding where the universe is understood to be so patterned and ordered that it evidences a logos, a cosmos, a philosophical cosmology.

This is not an easy task as it goes against modern naturalistic science and philosophy. It is, however happening, through the work of Berry, Whitehead, Adams and related thinkers. Thomas Berry has led an effort to develop a new story that restores a cosmos. He framed his new story in terms of our new universe story, the scientific story of an evolving universe. Berry focused on the narrative dimension of this.

Whitehead took a similar starting point, that of modern science. While the current view of the evolution of the universe was not established in his time, evolution in Earthly nature was well established as was the physics on which later discoveries regarding the universe were to be based. Whitehead focused on the organic nature of the universe and its processes and thus opened a way to bridge the humanities and the sciences.

With regard to Adams, you will remember that Brague said a cosmology involves a philosophical anthropology. Working on this was Adams’s contribution.
I highlight these thinkers, but many others have been involved, Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern. In light of their work, classical humanistic and religious traditions may come alive and can be expressed with new vitality.

Postmodern deconstructionists criticize meta-worldviews and they would do so even if they were called cosmologies. Postmodern deconstructionists believe that meta-worldviews are colonizing and are exercises of power. There is this danger, but an even greater danger arises from leaving in place the globalized acosmic worldview of modernity. This needs to be replaced with a globalized new cosmology based on process-relational philosophies, which rather than denying traditional cosmologies as the modern worldview does, allows them to come alive in new ways.

In conclusion, I know that people are going to still talk about the term “worldviews” without recognizing how modernity has relativized them. I certainly won’t attempt to interject the interpretation outlined above whenever I hear this term used. For us today, however, in light of what I have presented, let us be aware of the need for a new shared cosmology. It is part of building an ecological civilization. And within this new cosmology, may 10,000 worldviews flourish.