

## CALL FOR ECOZOIC SOCIETIES\*

By Herman F. Greene

We need to bring into being ecozoic societies! The challenge is set forth in *The Universe Story* by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry:

The future of Earth's community rests in significant ways upon the decisions to be made by the humans who have inserted themselves so deeply even into the genetic codes of Earth's process. The future will be worked out in the tension between those committed to the Technozoic, a future of increased exploitation of Earth as resource, all for the benefit of humans, and those committed to the Ecozoic, a new mode of human-Earth relations, one where the well-being of the entire Earth community is the primary concern.<sup>1</sup>

This is the jumping-off point, the razor's edge, the great divide, the call to action and commitment. Will we be about the technozoic, or will we be about the ecozoic? Our response will reverberate through every future epoch. We have come to a moment of great decision, one that calls us to answer once and for all the question posed in that song of old, "Which side are you on? Which side are you on?"

Yet, we find ourselves in a situation where there seems to be no truly meaningful way to extricate ourselves from the technological enterprise around us. This essay was typed on a computer produced by thousands of industrial processes, the computer drew power from vast electric grids that course through forest and field. When we depart for work, many of us will join hands with men and women around the world in the contemporary venture we have named "Technozoic." What then are we to do?

### Three Building Blocks

While there are many answers to this question, and many associations currently engaged in bringing into being ecologically sound societies, three organizational foci are presented here which may shed light on current activity in this area, and around which some people may choose to organize in new associations. These areas are the New Story, bioregionalism, and ecological spirituality.

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<sup>1</sup>Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 14-15.

## The New Story

The New Story—the narrative of the creative development of the universe from the primordial flaring forth to the emergence of the Ecozoic era—is one of the building blocks of ecozoic societies. At once a scientific account and an epic myth of origins, this story relates how things came to be and what significance and role humans have in the ongoing drama of the cosmos. The dual nature of the story, its blending of the scientific and the meaning-giving mythological, is what makes it the “New Story.” A primary source for learning about this story is Swimme and Berry’s *The Universe Story*.

The New Story needs to be told in myriad ways. It needs to be taught. It needs to be read in bedtime stories. It needs to be told at the hearth and campfire. It needs to be sung. It needs to be danced. It needs to be expressed in liturgy and art. It needs to be beaten on drums. Orchestral works, operas and oratorios need to resound in celebration of the evolutionary adventure taking place throughout the universe.

But, you might ask, as exciting as this New Story is, why is it so important? There are three reasons. First, the New Story awakens a sense of the awe and mystery of existence and of our participation in the cosmological order of the universe. Second, the New Story reconnects the self (and so restores the self) with that which is more primordial than family, tribe, clan or nation—the self’s relationship with the natural world from which it came and of which it is a part. Third, the New Story provides a unifying mythology for all human cultures and a basis for common action in the realization of the Ecozoic era.<sup>2</sup> If we take all these together, we might think of the New Story as an important part of the “knowing” dimension of ecozoic societies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The “Ecozoic era” is a term coined by Thomas Berry. It refers to the promise of a coming era when human beings live in a mutually enhancing relationship with the larger community of life systems. It is a process concept . . . not something to be arrived at, but something ever to be created.

<sup>3</sup>As a part of the knowing dimension, the New Story involves knowledge of the scientific and historical discoveries of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that made possible the telling of the story. These discoveries include, among others, the laws of thermodynamics; the theory of evolution; the theories of special and general relativity and of the relationship of time, space, motion, matter and energy; quantum mechanics; modern astronomy and the theory of a time-developmental universe; cellular biology, genetics and the discovery of DNA and RNA; and advances in mathematics and computational science and modern archaeological, anthropological and historical studies that have vastly expanded our understanding of human history. As Swimme and Berry have said, the New Story is the Copernican Revolution of our time. It is a narrative expression of a set of understandings primarily derived from science and history that are transforming human consciousness and reorienting the human community within the larger community of life. The narrative is important in its own right, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. The New Story, as any adequate myth of origin and purpose must, expresses an inexhaustible mystery, but the creative aspects of this mystery for humankind may best be appropriated when apprehension of the mystique of the narrative is combined with seeking to understand the new science and history on which it rests and the implications of this new science and history for understanding our place in the world.

## Bioregionalism

A second building block of ecozoic societies is bioregionalism. A “bioregion” is a naturally occurring geographic division of Earth that contains an interacting community of life functioning as a relatively self-supporting system within the ever-renewing processes of nature. To think bioregionally means to think of humans as being co-existent with and dependent upon the natural order, not as being dominant over it. The role of humans in the bioregion is to appreciate and celebrate its diversity and to honor and preserve its vitality, including the human part of it.

The bioregion would seem to be the fundamental ordering principle in ecozoic societies, the successor to the nation-state and the “world without borders” or “globalism” now so much in vogue. Here a word needs to be said about the word “society.” In the bioregional sense, “society” means the entire community of animate and inanimate beings. The constitution of the bioregional polity would preserve, not only the rights of humans, but the rights of the entire community. In the bioregional economy, the global would exist to serve the local, rather than the other way around, and the local would contain most of the industries and sources of food and supplies needed to sustain the life of the community. Citizens of bioregions would know their places as much by trees, plants, animals, rocks and streams as by streets and buildings and other human features. In a world of bioregions, eating and living would observe the gentle ordering of seasonal cycles, and there would be no place for wasting . . . for all the world would be a sacred place for the community of all beings.

Bioregionalism provides the context for meaningful human endeavor, and thus it can be thought of as an important part of the “doing” dimension of ecozoic societies. Good works are those that sustain the diversity, communion, and self-organizing dynamics of the bioregional community. Bad works are those that destroy the diversity, communion and self-organizing dynamics of the bioregional community. Therefore, work in support of the bioregion might include planting and maintaining neighborhood gardens; learning and teaching about composting and other forms of re-use and recovery of materials; learning and teaching about local plants, animals and geology; learning and teaching about native species, permaculture, and environmental conservation, including preservation of wild lands; changing personal and family patterns of consumption; supporting local farmers and industries; working with developers, town councils and zoning boards on development of communities that preserve natural habitats and consist of human structures that reduce demands on resources; learning and teaching about bioregionalism and its implications for government and economics, including such difficult issues as trade, employment and distributive equity among the differing bioregions; protesting development that negatively affects a bioregion; and sharing ideas on bioregional efforts that work.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Bioregionalism does not mean a return to the regional societies of the past. While the past provides some models of what is possible, it is not possible or desirable to return to regional societies as they existed in earlier times. Subsistence farmers may by necessity be living in bioregional economies and yet rightfully seek to

## Ecological Spirituality

A third building block of ecozoic societies is ecological spirituality. In many ways as humans we have lost our sense of the spirituality of Earth and of our intimate connection with the natural world. The understanding that has dominated the sense of reality and value in the classical civilizations and religious traditions has been based on a sense of the pathos of the human condition and of the transient and tragic nature of the temporal order. As observed by Swimme and Berry in *The Universe Story*, the phenomenal world in this understanding has been viewed as oppressive to the more exalted aspects of existence. The spiritual world and the natural world have been viewed as two different orders of being. The conviction that the natural world is a lower, temporal reality, as distinguished from the higher, eternal reality, has served to validate the belief that exploitation of Earth for the sake of humans is acceptable.

The secularistic tendencies of modernity (a turning solely to temporal, this-worldly concerns) has not proven to be an antidote for the problems related to this ancient dualism. With the de-souling of nature by Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century began another dualism, this between the human being with mind and the nonhuman world as mechanism without inherent values or purposes. Nature became something to be mastered and conquered, to be “tortured to reveal her secrets.” The millennial expectation of the ancient dualism to be realized by divine intervention gave way to the technological pursuit of a humanly made paradise (at least a penultimate one) in historical time.

Ecological spirituality differs from both ancient dualism and modern secular humanism. Ecological spirituality is grounded in the sense that from the beginning the universe has had a psychic/spiritual dimension and this dimension is manifest in every element of the universe and in the universe as a whole. As Thomas Berry said in his paper on “The Spirituality of Earth,”<sup>5</sup> when we speak of the spirituality of Earth we are not speaking of Earth as having an objectively spiritual quality, as when we observe the beauty of Earth, but of the spirituality of Earth as subject, the interior numinous reality that gives form to Earth and in which we participate. Thus, ecological spirituality doesn’t separate the divine and the natural realms, rather it sees

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improve their standards of living through participation in the global economy. In industrialized societies, where, for example, even the paper on this page involves shipments of chemicals and materials from several countries or regions and cultural exchanges are important sources of meaning, fulfillment and possibility, strict bioregionalism may be viewed as an abstraction of limited relevance. Nevertheless, the concept of bioregionalism would seem to provide the proper theoretical basis for moving to ecologically sound societies, ones that offer the promise of habitat and nourishment for other-than-human plant and animal species and sustainable sufficiency for the human species. It seems inevitable that, to achieve the goal of a viable human economy within the larger community of life systems, there must be a movement to localization of industry and agriculture to bring production, consumption, re-use, recycling and disposal closer together. Yet bioregionalism is not the opposite of globalism—indeed the natural world depends on global transport of air, water, chemicals, nutrients, and even species, such as in their migratory journeys. So in ecozoic societies there is a place for inter-regionalism (economically, politically and culturally), but what this place is must, in the future, be measured by its impacts, both positive and negative, on the interacting communities of life at the bioregional level.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Berry, “Spirituality of Earth,” *The Ecozoic* 1 (2008): 1-7.

the divine as indwelling and influencing the process of creation; nor does it separate human from other-than human life, rather it understands, in both an evolutionary and existential sense, that there is a kinship of all beings.

Ecological spirituality might be thought of as an important part of the “being” dimension of ecozoic societies. Simply understood ecological spirituality involves reconnection with the natural world and its numinous quality. This could involve attention to the singing of the birds, presence to wind and sea, absorption in a starry night, or nearness to soil and seed. If spirituality seems like a troublesome word, this element might be thought of as personal transformation—transformation from being separate from nature, to being present in an interior way to its mystery and value.

For some people ecological spirituality would involve a communal dimension and, for many of these, the practice of an established religion. In the communal context, ecological spirituality would involve the renewal of traditions or the birthing of new traditions that awaken sensitivities to the natural world and to the continuing creativity of the cosmos. The primary referent of these ecological spiritualities in their various forms would not be the written text of any religion, but rather the non-verbal, primal awareness of the revelation of the divine in nature. Ecological spirituality would not replace traditional teachings of spirituality and ethics, rather it would broaden the context of these teachings and expand the awareness of the divine-human encounter.

In a more complex understanding of ecological spirituality, the term includes the humanistic dimension of spirituality and presence to the mystery and value of the human community within the inclusive community of life. It honors the role of humans, as stated in *The Universe Story*, of “enabling Earth and the universe entire to reflect on and celebrate themselves, and the deep mysteries they bear within them, in a special mode of conscious self-awareness.” As so understood in its comprehensive meaning, ecological spirituality becomes a guiding motif for the realization of ecozoic societies.

So offered here are these three building blocks—the New Story (knowing), bioregionalism (doing), and ecological spirituality (being)—with the hope that they will illuminate the way to ecozoic societies.

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