

# Cosmology and Spirituality

BY MIKE BELL

Once upon a time there was an emperor of a great kingdom who had a most unusual hobby—at least for emperors. This emperor was fascinated by cosmology.

Cosmology is the study of the cosmos—the universe, Earth. It tries to figure out the answers to the really big questions. Where did this world come from? How did it get started? How did it develop? What is our role as humans on this Earth? What holds Earth together—what does it stand on? The emperor spent hours and hours trying to answer these questions. But it was the last question—What does Earth stand on?—that he found particularly troublesome.

## The Emperor's Question

So one day he summoned one of his favourite consultants, a wise, old man. And he said to him, "Wiseman, what does Earth stand on?"

"Well, Your Majesty," said the Wiseman, "Earth stands on the back of a tiger."

The emperor thought about this for a moment and then he said, "Well, Wiseman, tell me, what does the tiger stand on?"

"Your Majesty, the tiger stands on the back of an elephant."

The emperor thought about this some more, and then he asked the next question. "Well, Wiseman, tell me, what does the elephant stand on?"

The Wiseman responded, "Your Majesty, the elephant stands on the back of a turtle."

To this the emperor said, "Well, Wiseman, tell me . . ."

But at this point the Wiseman said, "Your Majesty, stop right there. From here on it's turtles all the way down."

## Our Cosmological Questions

Today we are still asking cosmological questions, but these are different questions than the Emperor was asking. The wise men of science have helped us to answer the Emperor's question. They have told us about the origins of the universe and its development: from the "Big Bang" 13.7 billion of years ago; to the creation of the billions of galaxies in an expanding universe; to the death of a particular star in a particular galaxy that exploded and gave birth to our sun and the planets and Earth surrounding it; to the creation of Earth four billion years ago; to the emergence of the human species two million years ago when a primate with an opposable thumb began walking upright.

We don't ask what Earth stands on, rather we ask: What is our role as a human species and as individuals on this Earth? Do we have a purpose? How do we relate to one another and to other species? How should we live our lives? Is there a God or some kind of divine power that is leading us on our journey? And what will happen to us at the moment of our death?

## What Does Spirituality Rest Upon?

These are cosmological questions, and they are deeply spiritual questions as well. And as we recognize their spiritual nature, we are drawn to the question similar to the one the Emperor asked. What does our spirituality rest upon?

For many of us who have grown up within the framework of an organized religion, the wise men of organized religions—and almost all of them are wise *men*—have told us that our spirituality rests upon a church, or more specifically upon the doctrines of a church. And while this answer may satisfy many people, others have come to believe that spirituality is

something beyond the precepts of an organized religion . . . somehow it seems difficult to shoe-horn our spirituality within the narrow strictures of church doctrine. And so we continue on our journey and ask the next question . . . “And what does the Church rest upon?”

The same wise men have said to us, “Well, the Church rests upon a book.” And while this answer may satisfy many of us, for this book—the Bible—is a wonderful book, we begin to notice that many people interpret this book in their own way, and some of those interpretations are downright scary. For many, the interpretations of the book have led to conflict, persecutions and even wars—all for the purpose of distinguishing the true believers from the heretics.

And so, in an effort to get to the bottom of things, we ask the same wise men a question once again, “Tell me . . . what does the Bible rest upon?” And they answer, “Well, the book rests upon the voice of God who has spoken to the writers of the book.” And we think about this for a little while and again we begin to feel uneasy about how a transcendent God out there spoke to these writers. After all, the scriptures weren’t created the way Cecil B. DeMille pictures it in his movie *The Ten Commandments*: Wizened old Charlton Heston, playing Moses, stands on the top of Mount Sinai, holds up stone tablets and a booming voice and lightning come out of a cloud, and words are written on the tablets. CRACK! “I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me.” You can almost smell the sulphur. “CRACK! Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” Today we recognize that the words of the Bible reflect the experience of the people of Israel and of a worshipping Christian community—but it all seems so far away.

We want a spirituality that is relevant, that will help us deal with the problems that confront us on a day-to-day basis—and no problem is larger or more relevant than biocide, the destruction of the very life-support systems of our Earth. And yet most churches have had little to say about this.

Some people are abandoning the organized religions they were brought up in and are striking out on their own. Many of them seem to be

gravitating to an Earth Spirituality outside the church. Others are trying to make their churches and their own spiritual journey more relevant by creating a balance between a redemptive emphasis and an incarnational emphasis—a Creation Spirituality. It is amazing to me the number of religious orders of nuns within Roman Catholicism that have embraced this approach, redefined their missions and opened eco-spirituality centers around the world. And, if you ask these wise women what the Bible rests upon, they will tell you that it rests upon Earth—all the way down.

### What Is a Spirituality?

Let’s now pause a moment to determine what a spirituality is—and then consider why so many people on a spiritual journey seem to be coming to a spirituality of Earth.

Spirituality is a place within us where we wrestle with the great life questions. Who are we as a species and as individuals? Where did I come from? Where am I going in my life? Do I have a purpose—and if so how do I know what it is? And how does my future relate to this beautiful planet we live on?—a critical question as we are witnessing the destruction of our planet’s life-support systems.

Spirituality is a place where we come into contact with creative forces, where we learn to dream, have visions, share in the dream of Earth and learn to express ourselves in mean-



ingful ways—through our work, our play, our music, our writing, our art.

Spirituality is a place of reality and relevance. It is not a warm fuzzy feeling detached from day-to-day existence. It is a place where we recognize the harshness of nature, as well as its beauty, and the harshness of human life and well as its grace and meaning.

Spirituality is a place that gives full reign to our intellect and consciousness. It drives us to seek answers, it helps us to recognize mystery and live comfortably with mystery . . . when there are no answers.

Spirituality is a place of prayer—a much ridiculed phenomenon in our modern world. I take prayer seriously as an essential aspect of my spirituality, and I smile whenever I think of the comedienne Lily Tomlin's wry observations about prayer and the scepticism it often confronts. "Why is it," she asks "that when we talk to God we call it prayer, but when God talks to us we call it schizophrenia?"

Spirituality is a place of ritual where, through continual practice and participation, we are able to discern spirit. For some, this means coming to religious gatherings, to others it might be their work in organizations, to still others it may mean having a meal with their families and looking across the table into the eyes of their children or grandchildren. Many people seem to express their spirituality down on their knees in their gardens.

Spirituality is a place where we go for courage and strength and healing. It is a place that helps us make the critical transitions in our life: from sickness to health or from health to sickness; from a sense of community to the loneliness we experience with the loss of our loved ones, from loving relationships to the breakdown of relationships and the courage to face the pain of separation.

Spirituality is a place of hope where we learn to face the future and come to believe, as Vaclav Havel put it so well, not that things will work out the way we want them to work out but that, no matter how things work out, it will be all right.

Spirituality is a place of communion, with the divine, whatever that might mean for us, with Earth and its species, with our fellow humans who are sick, suffering, or facing discrimination. Spirituality is what turns our sense of justice into a commitment to help change things.

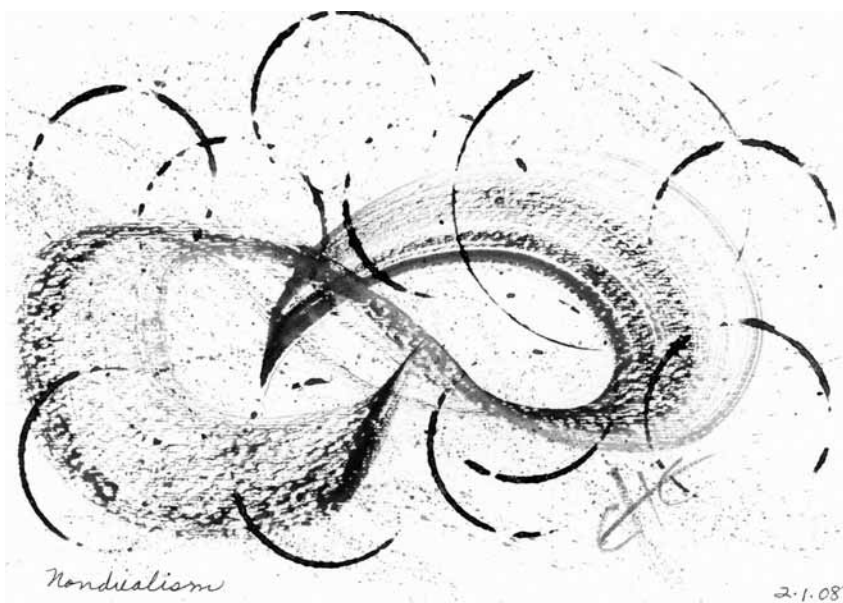
Finally, spirituality is a place of preparation for that day when our present personal story comes to an end and our new story begins as we return to the living Earth and universe from which we have come.

### **The Nature of a Spirituality of Earth**

I would now like to turn to some basic principles of a spirituality of Earth.

On one of my trips down to see Thomas Berry in North Carolina, a Roman Catholic priest, cultural historian and geologist, I asked him a question. I told him that many people in the Canadian Arctic where I work were interested in an Earth-based spirituality. I asked him if he had ever written anything on an Earth-based spirituality. He paused for a moment and said, "No I haven't. But I have written something on the spirituality of Earth that you might find interesting." I realized that his response was his subtle way of teaching me my first lesson.

The way I asked the question suggested that there was a human spirituality that used Earth as a resource, perhaps for our personal meditation: the beautiful sunsets, the roaring oceans, the grandeur of the mountains, the lush forests, the wonderful diversity of



species. Thomas was teaching me that there is no human spirituality apart from Earth spirituality. Human spirituality is part of an Earth spirituality. There is only one spirituality. For Thomas, spirituality is a way of being in which not only the divine and the human commune with each other; but in which we discover ourselves in the universe and the universe discovers itself in us.

The concept of a spirituality of Earth is based upon a few principles that are profound in their implications.

*First, we are part of Earth because we have come from Earth.* Modern biology tells us that our bodies are 50% to 65 % water. Just like the oceans and the rivers and the falling rain, we are part of the irrigation system of Earth. The rest of our bodies consist of minerals, the same minerals we find in the crust of Earth, the same minerals that we find in the stars and the exploding star that gave rise to our Earth. In a real sense, the stars are our ancestors. In our modern world where so many Christians insist on a literal interpretation of the scriptures, I've often wondered why they do not take literally the words of the creation myth in Genesis: "Then the Lord God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it; he breathed life-giving breath into his nostrils and the man began to live." (Gen. 2:7)

*Second, we are one with all the creatures upon Earth.* We now know that we share 96% of our DNA in common with chimpanzees. Though we differ from other creatures in our mode of existence, the same Earth has given birth to all of us. In a sense, the animals of Earth and the fish of the seas are our relatives. As Thomas has expressed it: "We are not a collection of objects, we are a communion of subjects."

*Third, what distinguishes us humans from all other species is our unique consciousness—our ability to reflect upon ourselves and the world around us.* And where did this consciousness come from? It came from where the rest of us came from—Earth. It was the Jesuit palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, who first noted that Earth was not only a physical reality, it was a psychic reality

from the very beginning. Human consciousness is the universe and Earth reflecting upon itself. We are Earth become conscious.

*Fourth, we are spiritual beings and our spirituality, like our consciousness, has also come from Earth.* Earth is endowed with an innate spirituality. This concept is not something new. For centuries, going back to the time of Plato and later to the time of the Roman Stoics, we find the concept of the *anima mundi*: the soul of Earth. So our human spirituality is a manifestation of the spirituality of Earth.

*Now we come to the fifth and final proposition—Earth is revelatory.* Earth reveals itself to us and we must listen and learn from Earth. For 25 years I have been listening to the Inuit and Dene elders of the Arctic telling their young people and anyone else who will listen: "Learn from the land. It will tell you and show you what to do." For years, because of my arrogance, I failed to understand what they were saying. Now I think I understand. If I can dazzle you with a bit of Latin, there is an ancient adage that says, *Nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*. It means, "There is nothing in the intellect or in our minds that is not first in our senses." This means that we have no concept of God or the divine that hasn't come to us through our awareness of the world that surrounds us. We live on Earth. It is the beauty, the magnificence, the bounty, and the healing properties of Earth that lead us to an understanding of a divine power.

Over time, I have come to change the way I think of spirituality. I once thought the question "What is the nature of spirituality?" required a long, theological explanation. Now I answer the question quite simply. My spirituality is the manner in which *nature is manifesting itself* through my consciousness, relationships, prayer, work and spiritual practices.

### **Witnesses to the Spirituality of Earth**

One may wonder if a spirituality of Earth is real, whether it actually transforms the lives of people? The best way I have to respond is to tell you stories about people I know or have heard about whose lives have been transformed. I'd like to tell you three of these stories.

Several years ago I got a call in my office in Yellowknife. The man on the other end of the line spoke with a lovely Irish accent. "Hello. Is this Mike Bell?"

I said, "Yes, this is Mike Bell."

"Look," he said, "I'm ringing you up from Dublin, Ireland. We've been reading this article you wrote on 'Community Development and the Ecology of Spirit.' We don't know where we got it, but we were wondering if you'd be willing to come over here and do some workshops on community development."

I said "Yes " and a few weeks later I found myself in the slums of downtown Dublin—in an area known as the canal communities.

The people in this community were being replaced by an urban development project. The organizer showed me the tenement buildings where most of the people still lived. We climbed cement staircases, open to the air that went up six stories. I hadn't seen tenements like that since I worked as a volunteer in New York's Spanish Harlem. The corridors were filthy: the walls were covered with graffiti, dank pools of water were in the corners, garbage, broken liquor bottles and needles from the heroin trade were everywhere. The apartment doors were huge, and many were scarred from various attempts to kick them in.

Then the organizer showed me their pride and joy, a line of small row houses that they had successfully found funding for and developed. They took me around to meet some of the residents. In one house we were invited in by an elderly woman. The organizer said to the woman, "Mary, what do you like most about your new house?"

I thought she would give me a tour of the house, or tell me about the safety she now felt, or the lack of drunken screaming all night long, or people trying to kick her door down. But she didn't. She motioned to us, led us back out onto the porch and looked down over the railing on her porch. I looked down and saw a small strip of Earth about ten feet long between the sidewalk and the edge of the house. And there growing in Earth were a few geraniums and pansies. She smiled at me, her eyes glistening with pride, and said, "I now have a garden."

Here's another story. Several years ago a close friend of mine, a consultant and colleague, was dying and in the final stages of cancer. Her husband called me from the hospital. He said to me, "The doctors have agreed to let Ann go home on the condition that she find a spiritual counsellor. We told them we had one." I asked him who it was. He said to me, "You." And I said to myself, "I'd better get down there."

Ann and her husband lived in a beautiful house, in a rural area of southern Alberta. The house was perched on the edge of a ridge and had a spectacular view of the trees on the hillside below and the fields beyond.

When I got to the house, the husband took me aside. "I'm worried," he said to me. "I thought Ann believed what I believe, what we were taught as kids growing up" —he was the son of a minister—"but she doesn't believe in any of those things."

When I went in to the living room to see Ann, she was sitting on a sofa looking out through their large picture window. After she welcomed me she said, "Did you talk to my husband?" I nodded. "He's worried about me."

I said, "I know."

She said, "Mike, I don't know about any of those things we learned about growing up. But when I look out that window, and see the beauty of what surrounds us, that's what tells me there is a God. Please tell my husband not to worry. I'm ready."

Ann died a few weeks later. We held the funeral in a little church out in the midst of the farmers' fields on a beautiful, sunny, August morning. In the eulogy I quoted the words of the great Blackfoot chief, Crowfoot, who, a century earlier, was reflecting on his own death in a place not very far away from we were holding the service. He said, "*What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the winter time. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.*"

Years ago I read the story of a woman in a book called *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl. I've never forgotten it.

Frankl was a psychiatrist who was sent to Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp. The first

part of the book tells about his horrifying experiences: about lining up naked in front of brutal guards who would decide on a whim whether you would go out on a work detail or go to the gas ovens; about prisoners with terrible wounds trying to convince the guards that they were still strong enough to work; about a camp life where cigarettes were the currency because one could use them to buy a potato or a bit of cabbage. He told about returning from day-long work details and seeing fellow prisoners sitting on their bunks, smoking their cigarettes, a sure sign that they had given up hope and decided to die.

In the midst of these pages of horror, there is a beautiful story. Frankl was called to the side of a young woman who was dying. He writes,

It is a simple story. There is little to tell and it may sound as if I had invented it: but to me it seems like a poem.

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me. "In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously." Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes," she said. What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.'"<sup>1</sup>

I wish to conclude with a quotation and a prayer.

Each year when I begin a new pocket calendar to keep track of my appointments, I write this sentence, a quote from Teilhard de Chardin, on the first page. "*We are not human beings on a spiritual journey; we are spiritual beings on a human journey.*"

The prayer comes from the Lakota people. On this continent, it is the aboriginal peoples who have always kept the flame of a spirituality of Earth alive.

*"Oh Great Spirit, our Creator  
All over the world the faces of living ones  
are alike,  
With tenderness they have come up out of  
the ground.  
Look upon your children,  
That they may face the winds  
And walk the good road to the Day of  
Quiet.  
Fill us with the Light,  
Give us the Strength to understand, and  
the eyes to see  
Teach us to walk the soft Earth as rela-  
tives to all that live."*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Victor E Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1959), 90.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the Lakota Prayer, in Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, eds., *Earth Prayers from Around the World: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations for Honoring the Earth* (New York: Harper One, 1991).