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The Universe Story, As Told By Brian Swimme and
Thomas Berry

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I have been trying to get my mind around THE UNIVERSE STORY, the book that Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have jointly written, aimed at telling the most complete “story” possible for our place and home. It is a consolidation and an interpretation of the pertinent empirical science and the creation-centered philosophy made available to us especially over the past century, but most especially over the past ninety years. The story is related with the perceptions of the poet and the saint combined with the perceptions of the scientist. It comprehends the life community in the world as a result of the evolutionary process as it was revealed by Darwin and Wallace and hugely broadened by Teilhard. It comprehends the revelations of Planck, Einstein, Hubble and Heisenberg, of Robert Wilson and Arno Penzias, all of whose discoveries make it plain that the Universe has been expanding and evolving constantly, instant by instant, over fifteen to twenty billion years; until we see today the vast Universe, the primary text without a context, the primary revelation of the divine and the locus of the encounter with reality and the mystery of being. It comprehends that the becoming process, the genesis process, the evolutionary process, is spiritual/psychic as well as material/physical and that these two aspects of life are inseparable and that life and living are a derivation out of the Universe itself, which is primary.

This sharply identifies the basic error of our culture which has been to regard the human as the primary reality whose importance outweighs everything else. What is derivative does not push into the ignored background what is primary.

The urgency of the dissemination and the acceptance of this new story is its promise to replace the old story, the story that is bringing on the ruin of Earth which is our connection to the life process, to the Universe process.

It is the function of “story” (sometimes called “myth”, sometimes called “paradigm”) to provide an explanation for how things came to be, to provide an answer for the child’s search for meaning to revive in the adult the sense of wonder and curiosity about the world and what that might mean.

For a millennium and half Christians lived from the story of the world, from Genesis to apocalypse, as told in the Bible. For three hundred years that story has eroded, and the purely historical stories that have tried to replace it have proved too limited and too one-sided....

says theologian John Cobb Jr. on the back cover of THE UNIVERSE STORY.

In large part, we have ignored any need for a “story”, or we have depended on the book of Genesis for an explanation of how things came to be and how we can understand the human place in creation. In an earlier essay, Thomas said:

It is all a question of story, we are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not yet learned the new story. Our traditional story of the Universe sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purpose and energized action. It consecrated suffering and integrated knowledge. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there. It did not necessarily make people good, nor did it take away the pains and stupidities of life or make for unfailing warmth in human associations. It did provide a context in which life could function in a meaningful manner.

How was it that the story we relied on so long was not adequate to our situation? It was inadequate because it failed to place the human within the context out of which the human derived. The human, in the old story, is the only creature of importance. All other living and non-living things derive importance from the degree to which they serve the human. This outlook was especially reinforced, Thomas tells us, by the work of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Rene Descartes and others in the seventeenth and later centuries. This made Earth, instead of a sacred community of subjects, and the residence of the spirit world, into an impersonal object, available for exploitation, for mining and deforestation and a sink for all the poisons of industrial civilization.

Now it became “harlot earth”, in the words of Bacon, whose secrets were to be wrung from it and its substance made totally available for human use on any scale one wanted to operate.

In the same period such students of government and politics and economics as John Locke and Adam Smith, and those who followed them, developed a way of understanding government and human rights and property rights that still prevail to this day. Humans have the right to life and liberty and property. It is permitted, encouraged, to amass wealth. Government must protect human and property rights and otherwise be as invisible as possible. Entrepreneurs must be free to develop their enterprises. Entrepreneurs have no obligations other than to seek success within the law, which must be absolutely minimized. Morality and ethics do not apply in the world of economics where the term “value free” is used. Self-interest rules. Individuals have the right, even the duty, to sell their labor for a wage. The natural world is a wasteland until human labor gives it value. The labor theory of value arose.

Christian religion was fixated on the redemption story to the almost total neglect of the revelatory story of the natural world. Such a turn

...had from the beginning been one of the possibilities in Christian development. The creed itself is overbalanced in favor of redemption. Thus the integrity of the Christian story is affected. Creation becomes increasingly less important. (From Thomas Berry's THE NEW STORY)

The old, prevailing story of how the human fits into the world is increasingly being seen as massively dysfunctional. It is not guiding us toward health. We have a world rapidly growing in violence and crime, in human abuse of all kinds, in warfare and starvation and, of vastly more importance in thinking about the future, in collapsing ecological systems. Overpopulation which is defended by reference to the old story, threatens all the Earth's support capabilities. The problems of income and unemployment are seen as problems of insufficient production and consumption, which are precisely the causes of Earth distress and economic distress. That such approaches to our ills are turned upside down from reality is insanity become the norm.

This work, THE UNIVERSE STORY, is not simply another book about ecology and the natural world. It is a successor story to Genesis and it will have the impact of Genesis over the next generations, if it fulfils its bold and daring intention which is to provide to the human inhabitants of Earth a new explanation for what is, and for how everything, including the human, fits into the created order. It provides the basis for establishing the new rules for living, rules which recognize sacredness in creation and recognize human dependence on the created order and especially on Earth as the central reality through which humans encounter the divine in creation. This book does what an origin story must do. It deals with the stuff of Genesis. It tells the story of creation as it could never before have been told because it incorporates what the human mind has learned through its inquiries into the fascination of stars and particles, of galaxies and grasshoppers. It could not previously have incorporated all the revelations of biology, geology, anthropology, archeology, physics, chemistry and astronomy, and the relationships of matter, space, time and energy, $E=mc^2$. Nor could it have put them in a proper relationship with poetry and music and architecture and the other fruits of the spirit.

Like Genesis it begins with a beginning: the creation of heaven and earth and it goes through the stages of evolution through the primordial flaring forth through the galactic formations, the shaping of the solar system, the origin of the planets, the rise of life and of humans and goes on through the historical developments of the last 40,000 years. And it ends with a vision of what might be.

Perhaps this book does something religion ought to do: write the cosmology

and assess our situation so that the rules for living can properly be laid out. But religion does not seem to be laying out the rules for living any more. And there is little stomach for a full scale attack on the corporations which is what any serious entry into this arena must take on.

This book is specifically intended to take its place

In the sequence that in the West moves from the Odyssey of Homer, through the Aeneid of Virgil, the City of God of Saint Augustine...indeed through all those epic works of the various peoples of the world that have enabled human communities to understand themselves in relation to the surrounding natural world and through the course of their history. Each of these provide by narrative a basic life interpretation suited for its times and a context for education of the society. (From "A Reflection" by Thomas Berry)

This is not to say that this book is perfect in its presentations of the new cosmology and the proper way to understand what has gone on, how to interpret it, and how humans might appreciate and celebrate the sacredness, glory and grandeur of the Universe. No book of such enormous reach, the first of its kind in modern times, could be that. But if it is not the perfect replacement for the old story, it will certainly do until a better one comes along. This is the right time for it. The need for it cannot be overstated. We have to rescue Earth and we must start with the right story.

This book will provide us the energy and the will to launch into the Ecological Age. We are no longer between stories. The new story which emerges here is the essential thing. It opens up a world of awe and joy and wonder in what lies before us. It is a reliable and correct story and it provides what we need to know about where we are when we get up in the morning. It provides us with life purpose. It enables us to answer the questions of our children, identify crime and punish transgressors. We can honor persons who deserve it and refuse honor to those who don't. There will be perspective once again. Distortion and lies, that so bombard us in today's world, will be recognizable, even to children. Practical results will flow from the knowledge of right and wrong. A new way of doing politics and economics will result from a right understanding of their nature and purpose.

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