

II. Cultural and Personal Cosmologies: Reality, Mystery, Faith and Spirituality

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Thus says Yahweh,
who made a way through the sea,
a path in the great waters;
who put chariots and horse in the field
and a powerful army,
which lay there never to rise again,
snuffed out, out like a wick;

No need to recall the past,
no need to think about what was done before.
See, I am doing a new deed,
even now it comes to light; can you not see it?
Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness
paths in the wilds.

The wild beasts will honour me,
jackals and ostriches,
because I am putting water in the wilderness
(rivers in the wild)
to give my chosen people drink.
The people I have formed for myself
will sing my praises.

Isaiah 43:16-21

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

R. Tagore
Gitanjali, 69

What are the key sources of meaning and orientation in our life? Where have we found life, depth, openness to what is beyond, beauty, gift, communion, love, affirmation?

How much of that has come from communities to which we belong, or relationships with others?

How much of that has come from our own personal encounters with reality, with nature, and reflections on our experiences of it, e. g. from prayer?

What do we hope for and seek?

More open to the Mystery that we are, and are part of?

Growing in surrender to it – to God and creation in faith, hope and love?

Enabling the gifts we have received to renew us and draw us into deeper communion with creation, with one another, with the Creator, with Christ and the other saving persons who accompany us on our quest?

Letting reality as we encounter it speak to us --

Being quiet, listening, watching, waiting,
speaking;

questioning, struggling, being empty;

finding, savoring, relishing, and remembering,

going back to what brings peace, joy,

life, reassurance.

Celebrating!

Cultural Cosmology and Personal Cosmology

-- we are enveloped in societies and in communities, each with its culture – assumptions, history, values, understandings, knowledge, orientation, faith;

-- as individuals we each have our own “take” and synthesis of this cultural cosmology with our personal experiences of reality, understandings, transcendence, communion with creation, with God, with others.

Nature, World, Universe

But as persons and as communities we are enveloped in Nature, the world and the universe. In fact, we have emerged from and are supported by the universe and the world, and all the “communities” which have developed within them.

Our relationships with and dependence upon Nature and upon Communities

What have been, and now are, the key experiences which have opened up and revealed the world, the universe, and the divine to me?

And have assured me that that I am loved, treasured and in relationship with God, with others, and with creation – motivating me to commitment, engagement, outreach, and service?

These experiences, and the realities they disclose – from the resources of our cultural and personal cosmologies – provide the concrete basis of our spirituality: how we engage and live out our “take” on reality, the *meanings* and the *values* we have discovered through discernment, relationship and commitment -- how we live out our *faith*.

“Christian spirituality is the daily, communal, lived expression of one’s ultimate beliefs characterized by openness to the self-transcending love of God, self, neighbor and world
Through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit.”

Elizabeth Dreyer

Faith: Our ongoing positive personal response in discernment and in commitment to perceived divine revelation.

This is a key element of both our cultural and our personal cosmologies.

Theology: “Faith seeking understanding”

The “perception of divine revelation” is much more than a scientific or philosophical conclusion. It involves a deep affective encounter with the mystery, giftedness and depth of reality and our personal experience of it. It is a response of “the heart” just as much as of “the mind,” and relies on our informed and sensitized imagination.

John Henry Newman

The Importance of the Particular

It is often the special and particular – that which cannot be subsumed under general laws of operation and behavior – which “center and illuminate” our lives, giving them meaning and Orientation.

Albert Borgmann refers to this crucial aspect of reality as “the deictic” -- that which can be pointed out or indicated, but not comprehended.

Faith is ``knowledge born of religious love.”

``Since faith gives more truth than understanding comprehends . . . [our] sensitivity needs symbols that unlock its transforming dynamism.”

Bernard Lonergan

Cultural Cosmology: expresses in primitive and uncritical but very powerful form the beliefs, perspectives, orientations and values – the transcendent principles or truths – which embody a society's ultimate origin and destiny. These are realities which are tacitly or explicitly assumed and presupposed by that culture. It thus provides the individual and the community with both a cultural and a social identity, and with ultimate meaning and orientation, thus unifying and animating it. Besides, it is reflected in innumerable obvious and subtle ways in its art, literature, religion, social, political and economic structures.

The stories, images, rituals, images, celebrations that express a cultural cosmology usually describe the birth and creation of the universe, the world, human kind, a particular nation in an imaginative way prior to the world we now inhabit but also in a way which endows our present era with meaning and significance.

They present “realities and events from the origin of the world that remain valid for the basis and purpose of all there is.”

Kees W. Bolle

Unlike contemporary scientific cosmological narratives, cultural cosmological stories have human persons and human society as their central focus. “. . . the cosmos is always the world of man [sic], not an external object of inquiry.”

Kees W. Bolle

Furthermore, eschatological myths, which describe the end of the world and of human kind – their ultimate destiny – are closely related to cosmological myths. They function as assurances of and invitations to renewal or fulfillment of the real origin of things – putting us in contact with the originating principle or divine being.

Mystery

Does not signify that we don't understand anything. We are continuing understanding more and more through science, art, philosophy and theology. Instead ``mystery'' refers to realities that are inexhaustibly rich – we never get the bottom of them. They embody essential aspects of reality that resist more than a superficial understanding and description.

Personal Cosmology Revisited

As individuals and as small communities we critically appropriate, expand, deepen and add to the experiences and mysteries our cultural cosmologies express and suggest. This develops throughout our lives as we grow in wisdom and understanding – intellectually, but even more through prayerful, open discernment of all our experiences. Our spirituality deepens and expands its horizons, guiding our engagement with the communities and the worlds in which they flourish.

How has this happened and how is this still happening for you? What are the key experiences – relationships, insights, inspirations, challenges, struggles which have fostered this growth?

Meta-narratives – overarching schemes of meaning and understanding

Petite narratives – little stories of the concrete and particular encounters, struggles and contingencies in which important revelations, insights and achievements are realized by the participants

Both are critically important!

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted them the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

e. e. cummings

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared
with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's
smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down
things;
And though the last light off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward,
springs --
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah!
bright wings.

Gerard Manley Hopkins