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Ecological Challenges for Religions

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Ecological Challenges for Religions

José María VIGIL

The development that is most changing Humanity's current consciousness is "the new cosmology" of cosmic and natural sciences. For the first time, we have a scientific view of the Universe: its origins, its dimensions, its evolution, the galaxies, stars, planets, and life. This means we have a very different vision than that which we previously held.

Throughout the history of our species, we have not had access to this vision. By imagination and superstition, religions filled in the gaps of our collective ignorance and fears. The myths that they created filled a useful and important social role. The problem is that today they cannot continue being interpreted as a "mythic epistemology," that is, believed as "objective descriptions of reality." Religions imagined a small, flat, immobile, fixed, world that was created exactly how we saw it, directed by a God "up there and far away" who was the ultimate reason for everything.

Confronted by new scientific knowledge, this "religious imaginary" has crumbled to pieces. It is impossible to be a modern person today and to keep participating in this imaginary. This is the global conflict between ecology and religions.

The "new story" which science presents to us—which is, for the first time, both a scientific story and a story shared by all humanity—offers us **a new vision of the world**, unknown until now:

-a universe in total and continuous motion: nothing is fixed, as we had previously thought;

-expanding: it all began with a great explosion, and everything continues to unstoppably expand;

-evolving and unfolding: it isn't a cosmos controlled by immutable eternal laws, but a cosmogenesis unfolding from within;

-with the appearance of emerging properties and self-organization from the disorder of chaos: the whole greater than the parts, but present within each part;

-oriented towards ever-greater complexity, life, and conscience, which flourishes, finally, in human beings, who create a collective conscience and take responsibility for the cosmos;

-holistically linked, in networks of networks, in which each particle is related to all others.

This new vision puts us in a very different world than the one which religions have taught us about. It changes us radically in several respects:

- **It changes the image of nature:**

- We can no longer imagine that mere human history is the only important history;

- We can no longer accept a negative (sinful) religious qualification of matter and everything related to it (flesh, instinct, sex, pleasure);

- We can no longer accept the myth of “original sin,” that everything was contaminated by our ancestors: instead, we must embrace the reality of an “original blessing;”

- In today’s cosmovision, it isn’t possible to accept a “second level.” This is no longer tenable. Today, everything must be seen as “on the same level.” There is no “metaphysics” (or, at least, it need not be necessary or obligatory to believe in it, however useful it might be to imagine it...);

- This life cannot be seen just as a passing vision, a “test” to qualify us for eternal life, the true and definitive one, the one beyond death, for which the Creator has destined us. Religions of “eternal salvation” urgently need to make themselves intelligible in today’s mental context.

- **Changes the image of human being:**

- We do not come from above or from outside, but from within and below, from the Earth and the Cosmos: we are the current result, the flower of cosmic evolution;

- It is false that we are superior, different, and removed from the rest of Nature, with a mind and spirit received directly from God;

- We are not the “owners of creation;” we are just one more species, the only one capable of assuming responsibility;

- We cannot live separated from Nature as supernatural beings, artificially denaturalized;

-We are not “supernatural;” rather, we are very natural or natural to an extent that other beings have not reached. We are Nature and Earth that feels, thinks, and loves, matter that has arrived at reflection.

• **It changes our image of God:**

-Humanity’s precariously limited vision of nature and the cosmos has been enabled by our insufficient image of God.

-The current vision of reality no longer permits us to imagine a God “up there and far away,” existing on a “superior second level” that we depend on from our inferior level down below. Today we see that it does not make sense to talk or think about an “outside of” or “above” the cosmos.

-The idea of a God separated from creation—transcendent—is one of the principal problems.

-An anthropomorphic God like us does not make sense: a “person” that thinks, decides, loves, and communicates like us...God, theos, or Zeus. Thinking that God is “Lord,” Owner, Judge, Rewarder and Punisher today is clearly an anthropomorphism.

-“Divinity” (in its real dimension) can only be found in the one cosmic reality.

Returning to the Cosmos and to Nature

Saint Thomas Aquinas said that an error about Nature has its roots in an error about God...We have suffered major errors in our understanding of nature, and, above all, through our ignorance with respect to it. Therefore, it is logical to assume that the image of God and of religion in relation to nature have grave deficiencies. Today, we are capable of remedying these errors. It seems clear that religions have turned their back on nature, especially because they have concentrated all their attention on a small “sacred history” initiated only 3000 years ago, and that this is the only “revelation” they take into account.

The explosion of science in recent times is undoubtedly a new “revelatory experience,” in which the divine element of reality is manifesting itself to us in a new way. Nothing is currently inspiring a new spiritual consciousness throughout the world like the new telling of our cosmic history. Religions need to feel the ecological kairos of this hour and return towards the cosmos and nature, in order to recognize in them our “sacred history,” overcoming the current divorce between science and spirituality, between religion and reality. Accepting the challenge of ecology does not mean including “the care of nature,” as one more moral

imperative. It is something more: it is a complete “ecological reconversion” of religion itself.

Challenges for religions

It is not just the physical image of the world that has changed. All of it has changed: its origin, its architecture, its dimensions, its complexity, its meaning. Faced with this change, religions that have elaborated all their symbolic heritage (categories, theologies, liturgy, dogmas, rites, myths...) in the context of the old imaginary appear profoundly antiquated, pertaining to an obsolete, distant world that does not exist any longer and may even be unimaginable. Religious language loses its sense and meaning, becoming unintelligible to younger generations. Religions that have served humanity during millennia to express the most profound dimensions of existence do not seem to work any longer

In this situation, religions feel behind the times and misunderstood, without understanding with clarity what causes this. They frequently react by defending themselves, repeating and reaffirming intemperately their sacred tradition, their “revealed truths,” their “eternal truths.” Instead, they should reinterpret them and make them relevant to the language and new paradigms which we now use, abandoning the errors of perspective that have harmed us all, caused by humanity’s ignorance.

The 1960s were a moment of hope and optimism in Christianity in general, when it seemed that a possibility was opening for a profound internal renovation and reconciliation with the world and with the values of modernity (science, democracy, the value of the person, religious liberty and other liberties, the perspective of the poor, etc.).

But this spring was quickly truncated, faced with the fear that sprang from the commotion that the renovation entailed. Fear won, putting the brakes on this movement. The steps backward have not done anything but distance society more and more from institutional Christianity. Tens of millions of people in Europe have abandoned religion in the past decades, for example, because that they can no longer accept a cosmovision that they see as already surpassed. They look instead for a spiritual realization through new paths.

Only a profound reflection—in the field of ecology and in other “new paradigms”—followed by a courageous theological renovation, will reopen the door of hope.

José María VIGIL

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