



Back to Where We Came From: Mythical consciousness and the re-enchantment of the world

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Abstract: In spite of the urgent calls to change lifestyles in order to address the issues of climate change, people are either still slow in responding through effective action or they completely ignore the calls. Various factors are involved in this stubborn psychology when it comes to environmental issues. But while green groups continue to design what are hopefully more effective campaigns, they are all perhaps dependent on a different view of the world: the world as a living being. If people are not convinced that the world is not mere materiality—a result of modernization, scientism and secularization—then none of the campaigns would be able to convince them to take on a greener life. Drawing from the insights of historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, and the insights of existential philosophers such as Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, as well as the spiritual evolutionary theory of Sri Aurobindo Ghose, this paper proposes to revisit the archaic “mythical attitude” and reinvigorate it in the contemporary age by recalling myths of origins that show the world to be either a divine person or the result of a divinity’s sacrifice. If the world could be contemplated as such, attitudes friendlier to nature would be made possible, and corresponding lifestyle changes would be easier to commit to.

Key Words: environment, mythical attitude, cosmogonies, sacred, spiritual evolution

1. INTRODUCTION: A Call to Change

The issue of climate change that results from environmental destruction continue to plague the global society. However, in spite of the efforts of various international and local green groups, people continue to live lifestyles that are very damaging to the environment. George Marshall (2014), in his book, *Don't Even Think About It* gives interesting explanations for this. Marshall (2014, 226) states that our “brains are wired to ignore climate change” because “[t]hrough our long evolution, we have inherited fundamental and universal cognitive wiring that shapes the way that we see the world and interpret threats and that motivates us to act on them...climate change has qualities that play poorly to these innate tendencies.” Yet, he also proposes that an appeal to sacred values—not just in religions—might be a good place to anchor climate change issues on.

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Agreeing with social psychologist Ara Norezayan, Marshall (2014, 219) claims that a radical solution would require turning action on climate change into a non-negotiable sacred value.

Brain scans have found that the parts of the brain associated with sacred values are those associated with other moral choices. Sacred values are embedded throughout our culture—the defense of our children is a sacred value and we would not sell them at any price. Torture is considered to be wrong and is not subject to any temporal discounting...National parks are a sacred value to Americans—you could never sell Yellowstone.

Picking up on Marshall's lead but going further than his suggestion to mobilize religious institutions to promote the sacred, thereby also avoiding issues of possible impositions and proselytization, this paper suggests, instead, a more phenomenological experience of the world as sacred through a recollection of myths of our origins. These cosmogonic myths have long been removed from the rituals that first accompanied their telling and have been, using Mircea Eliade's term, secularized. But contemplating on them in this day and age might still bring back some of the sacrality they once held and might allow for a change of attitude necessary for us to start caring for the world and jumping into action required to save what is, in this context, properly called Mother Earth.

2. Mythical Consciousness

Revisiting myths of old, especially cosmogonic ones may provide the modern, highly technological era—when the world tends to be treated as a mere object—a paradigm that could re-enchant the world so that it becomes once again a "Thou." Such a view may invite—in a modified guise—the "mythical attitude" that could allow us to see the world as a relational being, a kind of *person* who deserves care and respect, and one we could spiritually evolve with. The "mythical attitude" has been defined as the manner that archaic societies regarded the world as divine (Korab-Karpowicz 2002, 209). Eliade (1987, 12) calls this the *sacred* mode of experience, where objects, such as trees or stones, are experienced as *hierophanies*—when they cease to be what they are and become manifestations of the sacred. Eliade (1987, 204-05) claims that although the modern individual seems to have shed all sacred beliefs, that a truly nonreligious person living a truly profane existence is still a rarity. He or she has simply replaced old rituals and myths with new ones devoid of religious meaning. The mythical, therefore, has survived, but stripped of the enchantment it once had for the religious person.

To attempt to revive the mythical attitude through the retelling of archaic stories of the origins of our world may be a task worth taking on if it could offer a new way of looking at our place of existence. Martin Buber (1958, 6-7, 96-97), who advocated an I-Thou relationship between persons, saw the possibility of seeing non-human entities as "Thous" and relating to them as well. For him, the I-Thou relationship, as opposed to the I-it one, is the seat of dialogue, and it is in dialogue that understanding and compassionate relating, is forged. He says of a tree, for instance, that one could look at it as an object, know its scientific composition, its numerical value, its different parts and other characteristics that might be said of it. But this is only a *distant* way of regarding the tree. Once one becomes "bound in relation to it," the tree ceases to be a mere object.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole.

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The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way.

Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual. (Buber 1958, 7-8)

If we could extend this attitude and see the whole world as a “Thou,” as Buber made an example of the tree, perhaps it would be easy to understand why we need that change in order to participate in Mother Earth’s process of healing from destructive human practices. If the earth is viewed as a subject, rather than a mere object, we would know better how to engage in and with it.

This attitude is not without a philosophical foundation. In Eastern traditions, this relationship with the environment seems to have been the default attitude since the ancient times. Vedantic philosopher Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1940/1990), drawing from the rich, sacred and intellectual tradition of India, saw the evolution of consciousness that would eventually realize the consciousness that is hidden or less revealed in matter. He saw the universe as consisting of several planes of existence, from the material plane to the highest spiritual plane he called *Saccidananda* (Being-Consciousness-Bliss). It is a continuum of matter and spirit, where lower planes exhibit more matter than spirit, while higher planes, more spirit than matter. But the limited views presently afforded by the mental plane, placed only in the middle of the evolutionary continuum, makes us believe that the material reality we are so familiar with is simply a world of objects outside of us. Through what Sri Aurobindo envisions as a spiritual evolution (lower planes opening up to a higher plane) and involution (higher planes descending to involve the lower planes), consciousness will eventually be revealed as the basis of all existence, not just human ones. But this involution-evolution requires a spiritual awakening and a definite response to the challenge of going beyond ordinary means of knowledge and perception. Cornelissen (2008, 402) writes that

...the urge for progress toward ever-greater freedom and perfection, the idea that the forces at work in the individual are concentrated reflections of similar forces at work in the large and leisurely movements of Nature, and the notion of consciousness as the fundamental reality [are the] three ideas [that] come together in Aurobindo’s concept of an ongoing evolution of consciousness...[and that] they not only provide for a logically coherent ontology, but also *return meaning and enchantment* to the human enterprise. (emphasis supplied)

Cornelissen’s wording, “return meaning and enchantment to the human enterprise,” reveals the general perception that we have somehow lost the ability to find life meaningful, or that the world has lost its “magic” for us. Gabriel Marcel (1950, 21-22), another existentialist, has long sensed this. He saw that the world has been broken, in the sense that it must have had a heart at one time but that this has stopped beating. Marcel, like Buber, has also seen the world reduced to mere functionality, where real relationships have become difficult to realize, again, because of our inability to connect with others, which we see as mere objects.

On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo’s view of the conscious cosmos seems to be the necessary antidote to this loss of enchantment. Interestingly, it shares characteristics with the mythical attitude mythologists speak of. In the next section, some creation myths will be retold in summary in an attempt to show that a reflective engagement in these stories might rekindle the enchantment Cornelissen believes Sri Aurobindo’s view of cosmic consciousness could bring back. If this is the case, it could become the countermeasure to the prevailing

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Nature-objectifying attitude that makes environment-caring lifestyles difficult to shift into.

3. Parallel Cosmogonic Myths

Myths of the *kosmos* being formed out of *chaos*—thus, cosmogonic myths—portray divinities who perform deeds that intentionally or accidentally cause the organized structure of the universe. Often, they involve sacrifices on the part of these divinities so that the beings they have created continue to exist.

The Hindus credit creation to the hermaphroditic divinity known as Purusha, who divided into two, the male and the female Pususha. These two embraced and the first of all creatures were born from the body of the goddess. Giving birth, the female Purusha felt pain, and so she ran away. But the male Purusha pursued her, so she shifted into the shape of the primordial cow. Witnessing this, the god shifted into the shape of a primordial bull. Copulating, the two produced cattle. Again, the goddess felt the pain of giving birth, so she ran and changed form, after which the god followed suit. This is how they have created all creatures upon the world. (Eliot 1976, 63)

The Chinese, on the other hand, believe that it was the god Panku, the divine Sculptor, who carved out the world from his own body, thereby causing his death.

[His] hair became the whirling constellations of the night sky. His eyes turned inward, as the sun and moon. Now his breath is earth's atmosphere. His body is the earth itself, and his blood the oceans. Pan-Ku became nature...(Eliot 1976, 69)

A similar sacrifice is given by Avilayoq, now known as Sedna, the Great Woman of the Sea, who cares for the Inuit. She was a lovely maiden who fell in love and married First Sun Dog. They built a hut and lived by the sea, while Avilayoq gave birth to humans. But the sea and the sky became dark and the snowstorms unforgiving, that Avilayoq left First Sun Dog and went with her father, Old Man, out to the sea in order to appease the elements. But out there where the waves became terrible, Old Man shoved Avilayoq off the boat. When she tried to climb back into it, Old Man hacked her fingers off with his ax. But these turned into seals, walruses, whales and polar bears. Thus, Avilayoq sank into the bottom of the sea, her body becoming the creatures that fed her children at wintertime. (McVickar Edwards 1991, 99-101)

The Sumerian goddess Tiamat suffered the same fate when she was challenged by the army of her grandchildren, led by the god Marduk, who in the first place, caused her anger by being so noisy, disturbing the sleep of their grandfather, Apsu. She was defeated, and Marduk stood upon and body and worked on creating the world.

[He] divided Tiamat's body into two parts like a shellfish. Half of Tiamat he set up as the sky; the other half he formed into the earth. From Tiamat's saliva, he created the clouds and filled them with water...He put Tiamat's head into position to form the mountains of the earth, and he caused the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers to flow from her eyes. (Rosenberg 1996, 157)

A similar image is given to us in the Norse creation myth. It is said that in the beginning was the great abyss, Ginnungagap where the mist that solidified into the cosmic cow Audhumla came from. For her nourishment, she licked at the ice all around her until a giant, Ymir, emerged. Ymir became so great and

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carried in his body tribes of ugly giant children, that Odin, the high god, killed him. The blood that gushed out of his body washed away the giant children. From his bones came the continents, his flesh, earth, and his hair, vegetation. (Eliot 1976, 72-73)

On the other hand, from the Marind Anim of New Guinea, comes the story of Hainuwele. She was born out of a coconut palm and magically defecated gold and gems which she always shared with the people in the tribe. But greed and jealousy overcame the people and they killed her after a festival. Someone chopped up her body and buried the pieces in different places and these became various plants previously unknown to the tribe, especially tubers, that sustained them. (Eliade 1976, 38)

Our very own Filipino myth of Bulan and Adlao says that in the beginning, there was nothing but the sky where these two brothers lived. Bulan resented the strength of his elder brother Adlao and so challenged him into a fight. Adlao easily defeated Bulan, cutting off his arm which fell and became the earth. Bulan's tears, caused by the pain of his wound, became the rivers and the sea. Eventually, two hairs grew from Bulan's cut arm and these turned into man and woman. (Eugenio 2005, 70-71)

These creation myths and many others like them from around the world share the common motif that tells of the sacred origin of the world. Everything that exists, exists because a divinity has sacrificed himself or herself. Like the Purusha myth, they all show that we and all other co-dwellers in this world, human or otherwise, come from the bodies of divine beings, gods and goddesses who cared so much that they gave up their lives for us to continue to live. Reflecting on this theme may close the perceived gap between human beings and the environment and may spur that change of attitude needed for a more compassionate treatment of Mother Earth.

Very aptly, Eliade (1976, 28) relates that [i]n many cultures, the cosmogony was annually or periodically reenacted. The implicit idea is that the world is regularly threatened with ruin, and that it must be ritually re-created lest it perish.

The fact is, the world is perishing. And it might, indeed, have something to do with the fact that we have lost the sense of the sacred. In the framework of Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary theory, this would translate as the limited perception afforded by the mental plane, what is considered in Hindu philosophy as the ordinary mind which carries a basic ignorance about the rest of conscious reality.

[W]hen consciousness...forgets itself in the form it becomes the electron, the atom, the material object. In reality, it is still consciousness that works in the energy and determines the form and the evolution of form. When it wants to liberate itself, slowly, evolutionarily, out of Matter, but still in the form, it emerges as life, as animal, as man and it can go on evolving itself still father out of its involution and become something more than mere man. (Ghose 1940/1990, 236-37 in Cornelissen 2008, 406-7)

Sri Aurobindo's theory that shows how consciousness is so fundamental to all of existence provides reason for a respectful treatment of the environment as co-subjects, which the cosmogonic myths given above metaphorically embody. They tell of the same divine origin of all beings. These stories, when contemplated on, might give the proper attitudinal framework that could eventually be the foundation of what Marshall referred to earlier as the "non-negotiables." The idea that everything is conscious and that we are connected to all that is around us because of some cosmic sacrifice, that we are here because of the sustenance Nature has provided for us, makes it easy to ascribe a sacred value to our environment. As Marshall asserted, we defend our children

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and all that we care about, and we consider intentional harming as wrong at all times. If we see Nature as *someone*, instead of some *thing*, then the corresponding behavior toward it may also ensue.

4. Resacralizing the World through Stories

In another work, Eliade (1987, 82) says of cosmogonic myths that their ritual recitation...[is a] reactualization of that primordial event, [and] it follows that he for whom it is recited is magically projected in *illo tempore* into the "beginning of the World"; he becomes contemporary with the cosmogony. What is involved is, in short, a return to the original time, the therapeutic purpose of which is to begin life once again, a symbolic rebirth.

The absence of these sacred rituals in the modern times makes it difficult, when cosmogonic myths are told, to go back to that primordial time that Eliade speaks of. This requires the mythical consciousness that sees the world holistically as Subject. But because of the break that made the "I" different from the world now seen as "it," it is impossible for the modern individual to see the world as the archaic one did, and thus, impossible to experience that healing and rebirth for both the Earth and dweller symbolized by the stories. However, it is not impossible to recapture vestiges of that sacred time through myth-telling (and possibly, myth-making) in order to forge a modified version of the "mythical attitude" as an understanding of metaphors that will spur the corresponding behavioral change needed in order to respond to the call of Mother Earth. Marshall (2014, 228-29) explains that we have somehow been stuck in the war-narratives that framed climate change from the beginning. It generated other narratives that allowed us to veer more and more away from its reality and the urgency to respond effectively to it.

If this is the case, we then have to change those narratives and turn them into stories of shared experiences and values for a common quest to save ourselves, by saving the Earth. To borrow a term once again from Marcel, the world has been "broken" by narratives of violence. The relationship that existed between Nature and human beings was torn apart. Perhaps the narrative that connects us to the divine and to all that originated in the divine, will heal the world and make it whole again. Remembering the myths of where we came from may just be what we need in order to make the world sacred again. They might pave the way for the revelation of the hidden consciousnesses in what we previously thought to be lifeless matter, as Sri Aurobindo describes. Ideally, these objects, when personified in these sacred stories, become easier to relate to. They become animated—even just in our imagination—and thus, enchant our world. If these stories could remind us of where we came from—that divine origin that we share with all beings, then it might just set us in that direction that would start us, as Marshall said, "turning action on climate change into a non-negotiable sacred value."

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