

ECOCENTRISM: A 'Good-Place' Nature-based Spirituality

A UTOPIA FOR OUR TIME

Kirkpatrick Sale

Copyright©1997 Kirkpatrick Sale

According to the New York Times, and who would know better, there is a utopia named Absurdistan, a land that exists only on the Internet --- <http://www.trail.com/~honza/indeks.html> --- and proclaims itself as "the first 100 percent virtual country on this planet." Its population has a life-expectancy at birth of 532 years, which unfortunately, it says, "is actually never reached in practice." It is governed by a senate that convenes only on Saturdays, and then always as a marching band. It devotes some 2.9 percent of its land mass, for reasons never divulged, to "giant stadiums." And it is shaped roughly like the old Czechoslovakia and for that reason has a financial system "based on Rain Czechs."

I have not actually visited Absurdistan -- that is, in the virtual "actually" sense --- because I do not commit computer, but it's quite obvious it has a lot going for it. Absurdistan is quite wrong, however, in believing it is the first, or only, virtual country on the planet, for as the Times also points out "there are uncounted others with fantastical names" that can be found all over the Internet, a medium that incidentally seems to have been created for the infantilism that runs rampant in teenage boys --- hence the violence, games, sex and in this case fantasies that pervade it - of all ages. Cyberspace, the Times says, has become the realm of utopian visions of a myriad kind, including Salona, "the virtual homeland of your choice," and Cynaptica, whose citizens are committed to "qualities of compassion, kindness, nonviolence, honesty, fairness, love, peace," etc. In fact, the newspaper seems to believe, the Information Superhighway itself can ultimately create "a worldwide utopia: that would be "every place and no place at once, transforming human possibilities, offering satisfaction for every fantasy" and that will "transform us because we use it to communicate, proselytize, satirize, stimulate and offend" in whatever site we visit. (To which I am tempted to note that the hacker's favorite anagram for "Information Superhighway" is "New Utopia: Horrifying Sham.")

The Times is carried away here, but it is pointing to an important phenomenon of our era: people **are** searching desperately for utopias as perhaps never before --- for salvations, ideologies, beliefs, purposes, explanations, answers, some thing to provide

a moral and philosophical grounding for thought and action in an age - and, I may say, a civilization - that seems unprecedentedly adrift, devoid of common purpose, without self-confidence or self-esteem, empty of any set of values or ethics except those dictated by the market; an age that seems uncommonly marked by violence and enmity, crime and incivility, suicide and social autism, cynicism and corruption, alcoholism and drug abuse, and a profound, deep-running alienation by the great run of its citizens from both an allegiance with society and an identity with nature.

There may be as many as a thousand sites offering one version of utopia or another, serious and otherwise. No wonder that there are estimated to be another two thousand web sites devoted to obscure, arcane, and invented religions. I have learned today that even Oregon State University has its own Utopian Visions web site. No wonder that the number of books offering spiritual salvation has grown by 40 percent in the last decade and accounts for \$1.1 billion in annual sales. No wonder that the accident of a year coming along with three zeros in it has set off a millennial frenzy in a culture that, in some subterranean psychological way, is waiting for, perhaps even wanting, an Apocalypse and Apotheosis.

The Times, in its lofty way, dismisses the phenomenon of utopian hunger with the comment that "the word utopia means *no place*" This, though commonly believed, is not strictly true. The word, coined of course by Thomas More for his 1516 homily, has a double meaning - no place, *ou-topos*, in Greek, but also good place, *eu-topos*, a pun that More surely intended. And this is of some suggestive importance, for it lets us understand More's work as an account of some good-place, some real-world place, the author had in mind as providing the elements of a model, a corrective, for a Christian Europe that was in many ways in as desperate and dispirited and degenerate condition as our modern world.

More sets the island of Utopia in the New World and reveals details of its character through a sailor who is said to have accompanied Amerigo Vespucci on his travels there. This provides with some certainty the evidence that More must have been familiar with at least some of the many reports bearing Vespucci's name that were published in Europe in the years between 1502 and 1516 --- some 55 editions and reprints, one of the major best-sellers of its day --- and hence with Vespucci's descriptions of the inhabitants of the New World; he may also have been familiar with the works of the chronicler of the Spanish empire, Peter Martyr, whose accounts, beginning in 1504, were particularly influential among scholars and literati of the day. And it is clearly from these writings that he derived many of the most important characteristics of his Utopia, particularly the economic system of non-monetary communalism and the political system of masterless equality.

As Vespucci recounts it, the natives of the New World he met have "no laws and no religious faith, they live according to nature:" "there is no possession of private property among them, so everything is in common"; "they have no king, nor do they obey anyone, each one is his own master"; there is no administration of justice, which is unnecessary because in their code no one rules"; "they live in communal dwellings"; "they are a people of great longevity . . . and do not suffer from infirmity or pestilence or from any unhealthy atmosphere." And in Martyr's version, they "have been ever so used to live at liberty, in play and pastime, that they did . . . away with the yoke of servitude A few things content them, having no delight in superfluities . . . a few clothes serve the naked; weights and measures are not needful to such as know not skill or craft and deceit and have not the use of pestiferous money, the seed of innumerable mischiefs The land is as common as the sun and water, and Mine and Thine (the seeds of all mischief) have no place with them They seem to live in the golden world, without toil, living in open gardens. They deal truly one with another, without laws, without books, and without Judges . . . content only to satisfy nature, without further vexation or knowledge of things to come."

One can imagine the penetrating effect of such a picture on the European mind, on the mind of a man like Thomas More who hated with singular passion the depravity, lawlessness, poverty, violence, and melancholy so rampant in that age: over there was a land of liberty and equality, of harmony and plenty - and no kings! What a powerful idea this was for Europe --- so powerful indeed that we may fairly call this the origin of most of the ideas of a free commonwealth that would one day occupy the principal political thinkers of the continent and their counterparts in America. The idea of political liberty --- masterlessness, without kings, hierarchies, laws --- really begins here; so too, the idea of equality --- social parity, shared property, without Mine or Thine; so too the idea of social harmony --- things held in common, in peaceful accord, without disputation. And it really existed, in some good place.

Of course two quick caveats are necessary - first, that More's Utopia was more complex and refined than the rather simple accounts of American tribal life in these early decades, and second, that the societies of the Americas were more complex and refined --- and somewhat more problematic --- than these images. That said, however, that fact is that there were societies in the New World that had substantial elements of egalitarianism and communalism and liberty about them, and they stood in sharp contrast to the societies of Europe in its late medieval phase.

What's more, as we now know from five centuries of exploration and observation and scholarship, these real-world characteristics of American Indian societies can be found in many hundreds of other tribal, nature-based societies throughout the world, regardless of climate or culture, locality or longevity. Tribal societies, whatever their other differences, tend to base their systems and institutions on a profound and

abiding appreciation for the natural world, on a cosmic vision that places the human animal as a subservient, not a dominant, species in the vast panorama of nature and that solicits its understanding of the sacredness of every part of that panorama.

Hence, tribal societies tend to have economic systems that minimize human impact on the earth by making hunting and gathering and agriculture sacred acts with careful constrictions, and by limiting the draw-down of earth's resources with such rituals as the potlatch, which discouraged over killing, prevented hoarding, and provided regular and efficient recycling of foodstuffs. Hence, such societies tend to have political systems that do not favor or empower any single individual, whose unchecked actions might then be harmful either to the society or its lands, and rather stress the long term stability and sustainability of the group, factoring in responsibilities to ancestors, descendants, gods, and the living manifestations of nature. And hence, such societies tend to develop technologies, both tools and systems of usufruct, that harmonize with the patterns and phases of hearth, that do not endanger or eliminate other species, and that generally minimize human damage to vital ecosystems --- in fact they have to, in order to survive, and many survive for millennia.

This is not utopia-no-place that I am describing. The inescapable fact is that human societies have indeed lived much this way and have done so for great eons of time, in fact for by far the longest period since human societies began --- at least several hundred thousand years, compared to which the few thousand years of contrary, exploitative and hierarchical, experiments is negligible. I would go so far as to say, echoing the late biologist Rene Dubos, that such characteristics are in some way encoded in us by now, irradicably there beneath the veneers of civilization, and that they persist in the inveterate human longing for community, the impulses to generosity and volunteerism, the inevitable attraction to the natural world, the innate attachment to home and to the roots of place, and countless other instincts that have not been, cannot be, eliminated by however many empires and nations and marketplaces and global systems we erect. So, if these characteristics cannot be utopian-no-place they must be utopian-good-place and might therefore stand as prescriptions and models, for us, every bit as for Thomas More, and will represent some aspects of the desirable society.

Now, I mean this to be taken with the utmost seriousness: I am not in Absurdistan here. I am trying to argue that the only realistic, proven, certified way for human societies to operate in the world safely and sustainably over the long haul is with the same wisdom and caution, the same care and reverence, as the original people of the Americas such as those that Vespucci and Martyr wrote of --- people content, as Martyr says, to "satisfy nature," which is to say to live within nature's limits and proscriptions, to elevate the systems and species of nature to the stature of the holy,

and to base moral, economic, and political codes on a reverence for nature's eternal truths. It is, at bottom, a spiritual appreciation of the natural world, fitting the human species into the grand patterns of the living earth by knowing the earth as a sacred place and regarding its fruits as sacred treasures.

I call it *ecocentrism*: a nature-based spirituality that can serve as a moral template and a practical guide for human conduct. *Our* human conduct, now, as we approach the millennium.

As I look at the millennium I see, essentially, only two choices.

On the one hand, the world, led by the industrialized nations in their global frenzy, can go on in the confident belief that nature is an accumulation of resources that exist so that humans may exploit and exhaust them for the ever-increasing material benefit of (at least part of) this one ever-expanding species, using whatever technologies it can devise, the faster, more powerful, more extractive, and more consumptive the better.

That is the vision of the Enlightenment. That is the genius of American power. That is the artfulness of the global high-tech economy. And that, as 1500 of the earth's leading scientists recently said in a World Scientists' Warning to Humanity, puts "at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know." That would seem to be folly, but I have to say that it also would seem to be our likely future.

On the other hand, it is possible that some much *ecocentrism* as I am suggesting once lay at the heart of tribal society might still radically change the ways people see and use and live with the natural world. Some such understanding might provide them with the realization that nature is sacred and precious, that is - alive! Alive in all its aspects on a living planet, that all species within it deserve and need to exist --- and hence provide them with the understanding of how to treat it properly, to preserve and protect it, and to devise those technologies that maintain it without assault or depletion.

Now, I grant that the hard-nosed among you will find this sort of thing fanciful, and yet it is surely no more fanciful than the persistent belief that some party or president is going to fashion a government that will know how to heed the world scientists' warning of eco-catastrophe. I also grant that the ascendancy of an ecocentric perspective will not be swift or easy, if it ever comes at all, and yet I can see several reasons to think it might be possible at this moment in history.

First, I believe that at no time before the 20th century have forms of nature spirituality been given so much attention in the Western world, and never with such intellectual power and insight. The body of work, both within traditional religions and without, is accessible and direct, and includes writers from John Muir to Bill McKibben, Albert Schweitzer to Paul Shepard, Morris Berman to Thomas Berry, and Lewis Mumford to John Mohawk, a diverse and yet essentially coherent tradition.

Second, it seems to me that at no time before the birth of the modern environmental movement in the 1960's has there been such a widespread and sustained appreciation of at least the principal aspects of nature-based spirituality, particularly in the bio-regional and deep-ecology wings and in such organizations as Earth First! and Rainforest Action. What's more, as the scientist Freeman Dyson has said, this environmental movement is the only effective moral force in the world today, which by using "its power of ethical persuasion has scored many victories over industrial wealth and technological arrogance."

Third, I see emerging in American life what I might call a New Culture, made up of the generations that have grown up with the environmental movement and have learned the lessons of ecology since childhood, have never completely succumbed to the consumer culture's disease of "influenza," and are searching for a set of beliefs that could provide the underpinnings of a life in balance with nature. I have seen a hunger in many people and with it a restlessness as I have traveled the country in these past few years, and I think these people are a receptive audience for at least some of the basic ideas of it *ecocentrism*.

Finally, I am not alone in perceiving a heightened awareness that the millennium is bringing on, driven by a kind of fin-de-siecle despair and such as previous empires have experienced in their decline (the Spanish in the 16th century, for example, the Dutch in the 17th, the French in the 18th, and the British in the 19th). That suggests to me fertile ground and open opportunity for a philosophy of hope and possibility, or redemption and restoration, almost as powerful as the one that rose in the dawn of that other millennium two thousand years ago.

That may not be all that much to go on, to be sure. But, faced as we are by the overarching challenge posed to industrial civilization by its accumulating environmental crises, surely it seems to offer a greater chance for an answering call like it *ecocentrism* than most of what swirls around these days, on the Internet and off.

Of course, it's not as charming as Absurdistan --- but it doesn't rule out governance by marching band either.