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**A New Earth: Bringing the Earth to Completion**

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## **A New Earth: Bringing the Earth to Completion**

This paper addresses the concept that our spiritual task is to bring the earth to completion.<sup>1</sup> The overall focus is therefore on spirituality, with the underlying premises being Christian revelation and tradition. Eight themes are drawn on in the discussion of the topic: connectedness, the cycle of spirituality, earth-centred spirituality, the perfecting creation, co-evolutionary processes, human evil, the reign of God, and a new vision for the cosmos.

### **From Alienation to Connectedness**

Eliade states that the cosmos is a divine creation and that the world is impregnated with sacredness.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the cosmos is an organism that is real, living, and sacred.<sup>3</sup> Its rhythms manifest order, harmony, and fecundity.<sup>4</sup> Eliade had sought and found a “cosmic religious feeling” – that is, a fundamental and profound oneness that underlies and unites creation.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, modernity emphasizes individuality and promotes the myth of an alienated self.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, consumerism assumes and reinforces that people are essentially empty, small, and alone.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, one of the tasks of true spirituality is to puncture the ego bubble in order to move into the larger circles of our collective human and trans-human identity.<sup>8</sup> As connectedness is restored with rejected parts of oneself, with alienated relationships, as

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is based on the conclusion derived in David Toolan’s book, *At Home in the Cosmos*.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 116.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> David Tacey, *Re-Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2000), 180-182. In this instance, Tacey is quoting Mircea Eliade.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-185.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

well as with the community and society at large, expansion and a greater sense of completeness in life is experienced. Such a personal action, although seemingly insignificant, assists in the greater reality of implementing the spiritual task of bringing the earth toward greater unity and ultimately completion when God “may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).<sup>9</sup>

### **Completing the Cycle of Spirituality**

Spirituality may in part be defined as the task that brings an individual to greater fullness or completeness in life. In other words, it is:

A certain awakening to life that relates us more deeply to life. The imagination is opened to new possibility. Life can be seen and heard in a new way. There is the recognition that there are deeper currents operating in life. There are dimensions of life yet to be explored, all of which offer greater depth, connection, centeredness and wholeness.<sup>10</sup>

However, spirituality “is not a singular activity”, argues Ranson, “but an integrated constellation of different activities”, spread out over a shorter or longer period.<sup>11</sup> He suggests that spirituality involves four logical stages of a cycle: *attending*, *inquiring*, *interpreting*, and *acting*.<sup>12</sup> First, in attending, there is an initial spiritual moment of awakening or awareness, where a person recognizes that something or someone is beckoning them.<sup>13</sup> Second, inquiring involves wanting to explore deeper aspects of the

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 2228.

<sup>10</sup> David Ranson, “Spirituality: What Is That?”, in *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today* (Sydney: St Pauls, 2000), 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

beckoning received.<sup>14</sup> Third, interpreting introduces the social and religious sphere of spirituality where a person reflects on the deeper meaning of the beckoning experienced.<sup>15</sup> Fourth, acting renders spirituality more than just an idea but a way of living.<sup>16</sup>

Ideally then, the spiritual task is to bring the process to a completion by moving through the four phases in the cycle of spirituality. Again, the theme of *bringing to completion* is at play – and what pertains individually, also applies universally to the community at large.

### **Adopting an Earth-Centred Spirituality**

In pursuing the spiritual task of bringing the earth to completion, reforming one's spirituality may be required.

Today, the most common spiritualities are human-centred and emphasize personal well-being.<sup>17</sup> Such spiritualities focus mainly on human *persons* – their personal development, their cultural relationships, their happiness, their freedom, their variety, and their politics.<sup>18</sup> An extreme form of human-centred spirituality is anthropocentrism which places human beings at the centre of the universe.<sup>19</sup> The central problem with this form of spirituality, states Darragh, “is the reduction of everything in the cosmos, including humans, to value-free and objectifiable items of analysis and manipulation.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Darragh, “Seeking an Earth-Centred Spirituality”, in *At Home in the Earth* (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2000), 7, 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 10.

In contrast to such human-centred spiritualities, creation-centred spiritualities focus on the earth and its integrity.<sup>21</sup> Involved is a sacramental approach that sees created realities as reflections of the divine and therefore a source of divine revelation (though not equal with the Sacred Word).<sup>22</sup> Also included is an eschatological approach that recognizes the cosmos as being on a journey towards fulfilment in God.<sup>23</sup>

A creation-centred spirituality, then, leads one to uphold the intrinsic value of all beings and to see the purposiveness of an evolving world<sup>24</sup> in its ultimate bringing both individual beings and the earth to greater completion.

### **Constantly Perfecting Creation**

Toolan writes that “we are placed in a radically *unfinished* universe, where it is our task to bring things to *completion* (emphasis mine).”<sup>25</sup> However, is the premise of bringing the universe (including the earth) to completion valid?

Drawing on his background in mystical Judaism, Cooper<sup>26</sup> states that this universe is continually in the process of perfecting itself – and in fact the purpose of existence is the constant perfecting of the universe.<sup>27</sup> While God represents perfection, the universe represents the *potential* for perfecting – one can never expect to make the universe

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> David Toolan, “The Fallout for Spirituality”, in *At Home in the Cosmos* (New York: Orbis, 2001), 218.

<sup>26</sup> Rabbi David A. Cooper lived and studied mystical Judaism in the Old City of Jerusalem for more than eight years. One of today’s leading teachers of Jewish meditation, Cooper is the author of several books on meditation, spiritual retreats, and Jewish mystical practice. His website is: <http://www.rabbidavidcooper.com/>

<sup>27</sup> David A. Cooper, *God Is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 77.

perfect.<sup>28</sup> In kabbalistic thought, then, the purpose for humans is to *continuously* perfect themselves and the universe.<sup>29</sup>

Support for the kabbalistic perspective can be gleaned from process theology based on its central tenet that reality is a process of *becoming*.<sup>30</sup> Or, as Hoggard-Creegan summarizes, “[p]rocess metaphysics reflects a non-static, evolving, creative, subjective reality, and the new science, as opposed to the older models based on Greek thought and Newtonian mechanics.”<sup>31</sup> Toolan also refers to Whitehead (who pioneered theology based on process philosophy) and his “sense of God as the ‘lure’ behind all *becoming* and movement in the universe (emphasis mine).”<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, Edwin Hubble has presented data that the universe is *dynamic* and in a state of *irreversible rapid outward expansion*.<sup>33</sup> This landmark discovery is described as follows:

[I]n 1924 Edwin Powell Hubble, looking through a new telescope at the Mount Wilson Observatory in California, discovered that the nebulae he saw were not just dust and gas sprinkled about the Milky Way. They were separate galaxies. Four years later, studying the "red shift" in the light from these galaxies, he established that they were moving away rapidly in all directions, the most distant ones moving the fastest.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> W. D. Beck, “Process Theology”, in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 534.

<sup>31</sup> N. Hoggard-Creegan, “Process Theology”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 958.

<sup>32</sup> Toolan, “The Fallout for Spirituality”, 204.

<sup>33</sup> Gerald L. Schroeder, *God According to God: A Scientist Discovers We’ve Been Wrong About God All Along* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 163-164. Schroeder earned his Ph.D. in physics and the earth sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. An applied theologian, he currently teaches at the College of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. One can visit the author online at [www.geraldschroeder.com](http://www.geraldschroeder.com)

<sup>34</sup> Gary MacEoin, “At Home in the Cosmos – Review”, *National Catholic Reporter*, 2 February 2001, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1141/is\\_14\\_37/ai\\_70637162/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_14_37/ai_70637162/) (22 September 2010).

An entire universe, therefore, that is in constant flow and change is difficult to reconcile with a universe where things have to be brought to a state of static completion.

### **Co-Evolutionary Processes**

Furthermore, to claim that our spiritual task involves bringing the earth to perfect completion runs contrary to *evolutionary* processes.

To begin with, scientific evidence, together with theological reflection, shows that the universe is still being created. Hart states that there “are complementary and inextricably interwoven evolutionary processes” in place – physical, biological, social, and intellectual.<sup>35</sup> Thus, God’s creative efforts did not end after the six days of creation (whether 24 hours or billions of years).<sup>36</sup> Rather, creation is *ongoing* and in a state of development.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, evolutionary human development – from a pre-human state to an ongoing human stage – shows developing intellectual and moral capacities in human beings.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, with a developed human consciousness, humans are co-creators, involved in co-creation in an evolutionary natural world.<sup>39</sup> The implications are contrary to bringing earth to a definite point of completion in the future:

Since natural evolution proceeds ordinarily without human assistance, so human co-creators would be creating not only an added human cultural and social history,

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<sup>35</sup> John Hart, “Creation Consciousness and Concern”, in *What Are They Saying about Environmental Theology?* (New York: Paulist, 2003), 105-106.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

but also appropriating and altering past results of God's cosmic creativity, diverting them solely to human use. On the other hand, humans' consciousness, if humans are co-creators, would reflect and participate in divine consciousness and creativity, and people would be the means by which *part of* the Spirit's vision for the universe comes to pass (emphasis mine).<sup>40</sup>

### **Understanding Human Evil and Natural Catastrophes**

In the context of evil and suffering on earth, could postulating that humanity's spiritual task is to bring the earth to completion (without vice and pain) imply an element of coercion? Such a stance would be contrary to understanding the human situation in an evolutionary cosmos.<sup>41</sup>

Rather, needed is a reconciling of the problems of evil and disasters with the existence of a loving and creative Spirit.<sup>42</sup> A beginning point is that integral to divine being is freedom.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, the Creator Spirit grants freedom to the universe.<sup>44</sup> Notwithstanding, as Hart writes:

The loving Spirit does not will that creatures suffer, but does will that creatures have freedom to make their own choices . . . In order to allow this freedom to operate, the Spirit voluntarily refrains from coercing the cosmos or communities of the cosmos by a commanding or otherwise overpowering presence. This cosmic *kenosis*, a self-emptying of divine power, is exemplified in the Christian tradition not only in the evolutionary processes evident to everyone, but in the incarnation evident to the eyes of faith.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



Finally, throughout the cosmos is a balance of love and freedom.<sup>46</sup> The essence of the Spirit – love – remains prioritized over freedom.<sup>47</sup> While the Spirit remains free, nonetheless, the Spirit who is love, also suffers with the suffering.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Reign of God**

The primary mission and teaching of Jesus, based on the consensus of Scripture scholars, were about the “reign of God” and its fulfilment when eventually God’s will is done “on earth as it is in heaven”.<sup>49</sup> This spiritual task could be construed as bringing the earth to a state of completion.

However, a passage with messianic overtones from the book of Isaiah bears reflection. The prophet Isaiah writes:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.* He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this [emphasis mine] (Is 9:6-7).<sup>50</sup>

The use of the word “increase” (v. 7) suggests that the prophecy is referring to much more than a particular great king of Judah.<sup>51</sup> It is Christ who was to be a descendent of David

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>50</sup> Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 1313.

<sup>51</sup> G. W. Grogan, “Isaiah”, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 74.

and would rule in righteousness for ever.<sup>52</sup> No reference is made to the reign of God being brought to a form of completion. Rather, the prophecy speaks of expansiveness.

Finally, during his ministry, Jesus speaks of God's reign having arrived among the followers (Mk 1:15; Lk 17:21), but not entirely fulfilled.<sup>53</sup> The prayer he gives his disciples petitions that God's reign come.<sup>54</sup> The followers are then commissioned to work with the Spirit to bring about the vision presented in the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13) – to transform human communities and human history.<sup>55</sup> The state of final realization – a bringing of the earth to completion – is not specifically given. Rather, as Hart states, “the human role is part of and complementary to the ongoing unfolding of divine creativity and the universal freedom granted by divine *kenosis*.”<sup>56</sup>

### **An Inspiring Vision for the Cosmos**

When Toolan writes that “the universe is unfinished, imperfect, a mere instalment on an extravagant future”,<sup>57</sup> one can suggest that his intent is *not* that the spiritual task of humans is to bring the earth to a perfect state of completion – but rather, that there is *an on-going process of completing and perfecting*. With this in view, Toolan can be seen to present an inspiring and challenging ethical vision of love, care, and responsibility for the cosmos, which is our home.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 1313. See also Is 11:3-5; 2 Sa 7:12-13, 16; Jer 33:15, 20-22.

<sup>53</sup> Hart, “Creation Consciousness and Concern”, 123.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>57</sup> Toolan, “The Fallout for Spirituality”, 213.

<sup>58</sup> Michael D. Guinan, “At Home in the Cosmos”, *St. Anthony Messenger Magazine Online*, July 2002, <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Jul2002/books.asp> (22 September 2010).

First, Toolan shows that God, who is Creator/Destroyer,<sup>59</sup> is also revolutionary – a God of a future that unfolds (see Isaiah 48:6-9).<sup>60</sup> The Just God is not a being who nostalgically looks back to some Edenic bliss.<sup>61</sup> Instead, “the movement is ever forward thrusting, to the extent that, even in the Book of Revelation’s vision of the end-time, God’s last word is: ‘Now I am *making* the whole of creation new [emphasis mine]’ (Rev 21:5).”<sup>62</sup>

Second, Toolan argues that for the believer the static concept of the earth and universe no longer holds relevancy. Nature as mechanistic and deterministic is outdated – indeed, God as engineer and watchmaker is out.<sup>63</sup> “Instead of the philosopher's God – infinite, unchanging – our current understanding of the cosmos”, writes MacEoin, “fits only with the biblical God, whose identity consists in self-constancy rather than in sameness, who is faithful to his promises.”<sup>64</sup>

Third, drawing on the imagery of the great vision of the rainbow covenant and the Eucharist,<sup>65</sup> Toolan presents ecology as a religious issue that calls for a new social contract with creation based on a Christ-centred faith. Humanity has its crucial role based on the new cosmology presented by the intersection of contemporary physics, science, ecology and Christianity. Toolan urges that spirituality is not simply what is done in church, in

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<sup>59</sup> Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 1392. Isaiah 51:6 states: “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.”

<sup>60</sup> Toolan, “The Fallout for Spirituality”, 201; Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 1385. Isaiah 48:6-8 states: “From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you. They are created now, and not long ago; you have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, ‘Yes, I knew of them.’ You have neither heard nor understood; . . .”

<sup>61</sup> Toolan, “The Fallout for Spirituality”, 201.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*; Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 2457. Revelation 21:5 is rendered as: “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’”

<sup>63</sup> MacEoin, “At Home in the Cosmos – Review”.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Toolan, “The Fallout for Spirituality”, 210-212.

private meditation, or in reading good literature.<sup>66</sup> Humans have work to do because the universe is indeed unfinished and imperfect.<sup>67</sup> MacEoin sums up the challenge for humankind:

Our new knowledge imposes on us new duties. In the 21st century we have literally become the authors of ongoing creation. We as a world community now determine if life is to continue on the earth and in the oceans, if rainforests continue to sustain their millions of life forms, if the land will continue to be fertile, if the air is to be breathable.<sup>68</sup>

### Conclusion

This paper has examined Toolan's premise that our spiritual task is to bring the earth to completion. Moving from alienation to connectedness, completing the cycle of spirituality, and adopting an earth-centred spirituality can be viewed as movement toward a greater state of completeness. However, the existence of a constantly perfecting creation, co-evolutionary processes, human evil and natural catastrophes, as well as the reign of God, speak against reaching a finalized state of absolute perfect completion. Notwithstanding, if Toolan's claim can be reframed in terms of our spiritual task being involved in *an ongoing process of completing and perfecting*, then one can embrace his inspiring and challenging ethical vision of love and responsibility for the cosmos.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> David S. Toolan, "Praying in a Post-Einsteinian Universe", *Cross Currents*, Winter 1996-97, 46:4, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/toolan.html> (22 September 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Toolan, "The Fallout for Spirituality", 213.

<sup>68</sup> MacEoin, "At Home in the Cosmos – Review".

<sup>69</sup> Guinan, "At Home in the Cosmos"

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