

New Stories for a New World

David Christian
Macquarie University
david.christian@mq.edu.au

In *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Ursula Goodenough argues that all coherent social communities or cultures have been held together in part by sharing and committing to a core story about the world, which is often embedded in what we think of as a religious tradition. The core story has three distinct “axes”. First, it describes the world. It tells how the world came to be and how it works. Second, it stirs people. It resonates emotionally with those committed to it, so it can energize them and inspire action. Third, it offers moral guidance about the sort of action and behavior we should commit to. In Goodenough’s words, every religious tradition has an “interpretive”, a “spiritual” and a “moral” axis [p. 220]. Her book asks if we can imagine a new worldview or world story that is based on the descriptive power of modern science, but also has the inspirational and moral power of traditional religions. Much of her book describes what that new story may look like. In contrast to many religious traditions, the new story will not be theistic because it draws largely on the insights of modern science. That means it will lack the gods that populate and give shape to so many traditional religions. Nevertheless, she argues that the modern world story, like all religious traditions, will eventually work not just as a description of the world and a guide to manipulating it (science already does that), but also along the inspirational and moral axes that have made traditional religious traditions such powerful agents of both social cohesion and change.

I have spent many years trying to construct one possible version of this modern world story, and I admire Goodenough’s approach to the same challenge, in particular the wonderful insights that she offers as a biologist. Here, I would like to focus on an aspect of religious traditions that she touches on only briefly: we might call it the “political” axis. By this I mean the way that traditional religious traditions and world stories have held communities together, creating cohesion and shared loyalties, and enabling collaboration between large and diverse groups of people. As Goodenough points out, the word “religion” derives from the Latin *religare*, to bind together [p. 83], and indeed all religious traditions have helped create shared loyalties and commitments while also tolerating much variety in local traditions and rituals and even in interpretations of their core stories. Their ability to mobilize and coordinate the actions of large and diverse human communities has given them extraordinary political influence, an influence they share with other modern worldviews such as nationalism or communism.

In a nice parallel to the biological themes that dominate Goodenough’s book, there is an analogy here with the evolution of multi-cellular organisms. Despite great diversity at the cellular level, multi-cellular organisms could not function without a high level of cooperation between billions or trillions of cells. That collaboration is enabled partly by genetic similarity. But it also arises from the dependence of each cell on the survival of the larger organism. Cells, in other words, have an interest in tuning in to the needs of the larger organism and playing their part in ensuring its survival. Those that do not collaborate threaten the whole organism as cancer cells threaten human bodies. That is why bodies, like societies, have many ways of re-educating or eliminating their most dissident members.

Humans also collaborate because their genomes are very similar; and suddenly, in today’s intimately globalized world they also find themselves dependent in entirely new ways on the emerging community of global humanity. But humans also collaborate in novel and extraordinarily powerful ways because human language allows them to share ideas, knowledge, stories and purposes with unmatched virtuosity. I call this distinctive feature of our species “collective learning”. Collective learning explains why

shared stories have played such a powerful role in human history. In the globally integrated world of the Anthropocene epoch, that coordinating role has suddenly acquired a new strategic significance because for the first time in human history, catastrophic breakdowns could affect the whole of humanity and much of the biosphere. Two centuries ago, our most powerful weapons were cannons. They could inflict appalling damage, but only locally. Since 1945, we have built weapons that could ruin much of the biosphere in a few hours. We also have the biological knowledge to design and build disease organisms that could disperse around the world almost instantaneously through modern transportation systems, while the burning of fossil fuels on a massive scale is undermining the relatively stable climate regimes of the last ten thousand years.

Avoiding these disasters and repairing the damage we have already done will require the coordinated activity of most people and governments on earth. That is why the coordinating function of worldviews has suddenly become so critical. Today, for the first time in human history, we need a unifying story whose main features can be shared by most people on earth, a story that can inspire the loyalty and commitment of billions of people, while co-existing, as traditional religions did, with many different local traditions. Goodenough makes the argument for such a worldview eloquently: “That we need a planetary ethic is so obvious that I need but list a few key words: climate change, ethnic cleansing, fossil fuels, habitat and species preservation, human rights, hunger, inland waterways, infectious disease, nuclear weapons, oceans, pollution population pressures. ... Any planetary foundation needs to be anchored in a shared worldview—a culture-independent, globally accepted consensus as to how things are.” [pp. 2-3] In the globalized world of the Anthropocene, the future of humans and of many other species on earth will be shaped, for better or worse, and for thousands, even millions of years, by the conscious actions of members of one species: our own. If those actions are *not* coordinated by a shared world story, if they are contradictory or incoherent, they will threaten the future of our own and many other species.

There are many signs that a global world story is evolving rapidly. Its presence is evident in the planetary impact of modern scientific education and research, and in multiplying global agreements on issues such as climate change, health and sustainability, and it is being disseminated (alongside many other stories) by the astonishing global media of the Anthropocene. But is this story accepted widely enough to help us build a better future in coming decades and avoid existential catastrophes? There remain enough dangerous conflicts between and within states, and between different cultural traditions for human self-destruction to remain a real possibility. That is why the task of teasing out and disseminating a new planetary ethic remains so urgent and why Goodenough’s book is so timely.

But there is something much deeper going on here and it relates to another of Goodenough’s themes: emergence. The stories at the core of traditional religions are big stories. They situate communities within all of time, embracing both past and future. This is also true of the emerging worldview that Ursula Goodenough describes. Stand back and look at what is happening on planet earth right now and it becomes apparent that the changes occurring today are not just of human significance. Four billion years after life first appeared on earth, something new is emerging. It is made up of billions of individual humans acting with some degree of coordination. And that new collective being now holds in its hands the fate of the much larger entity that James Lovelock described as “Gaia”. So what humans do in coming decades has become a matter of planetary significance. Indeed, it may even be significant on cosmological scales because what is emerging before our eyes is something entirely new: a conscious planet. The earth is becoming conscious in the limited but important sense in which we, too our conscious. Most of the things that happen in our bodies occur as a result of unconscious processes that work at many levels from those of individual cells to whole organs. But some of the biggest decisions affecting our bodies (should I really be bungee jumping?) arise from conscious decisions. In a similar

way, we suddenly find ourselves in a new era in which many of the big decisions about the future of the biosphere will be shaped by the conscious decisions of human beings.

A conscious planet is, as far as we know, a new type of complex entity, certainly in our part of the cosmos. And its birth should inspire the same feelings of wonder and awe (and perhaps even terror) that warm and animate all religious traditions as we try to protect and nurture what is emerging: a sustainable planet that can support a flourishing biosphere far into the future. As this new being evolves, so will the new world story that describes its emergence. We should expect that story not to be fixed, but to evolve and deepen along all its axes—descriptive, emotional, moral and political. It will become richer, profounder and more powerful as we and future generations of humans learn what it really means and feels like to manage, maintain and protect an entire biosphere for the sake of future generations of humans and for many other species, too.

We can look even further ahead and make some reasonable guesses about some of the emergent properties of this new entity that is being born today. First, of course, it must survive its birth trauma, and that is by no means certain. Whether it survives will depend largely on actions taken by members of our species over the next century or two. But if it survives, we can plausibly predict that a conscious planet earth will eventually reproduce itself, like living organisms, as humans explore and settle other worlds, which will in turn become conscious as our descendants start to shape their fate. We have already started exploring our solar system, in a continuation of the migratory explorations that have provided a sort of ground bass to much of human history. Those migrations will surely continue into the future, first within our solar system and then, perhaps after many centuries, into nearby parts of our galaxy. And in another striking parallel with the history of life on earth, we can plausibly predict that conscious planets will evolve and diversify as migrating humans and post-humans explore new galactic niches. Our own descendants will also evolve and change, just as living organisms once evolved as they explored different biological niches on planet earth. But our ancestors will probably evolve faster, using new technologies that allow them to consciously manipulate their own genes, bodies and minds. If these scenarios are on the right track, then in a few millennia we can imagine our region of the Milky Way galaxy being populated by a dazzling variety of different species of conscious planets, some of which may be entirely artificial. Our descendants, too, will diversify, using new technologies to systematically adapt their bodies and minds to new environments, creating in this way a vast range of new types of post-humans.

I offer these ideas not because they can be defended with certainty, but because seeing the present moment of human and planetary history in this much larger perspective may be just what is needed to help generate the sense of awe, and the sense of moral purpose and determination that a new planetary ethic will need if it is to acquire the inspirational and moral power once wielded by traditional religions. Only if it can inspire and guide us as well as informing us will a new worldview be able to motivate and steer the activities of billions of humans just as mammalian brains coordinate the activities of trillions of cells. Only then, will it be able to play the coordinating role once played by all traditional religions.

And of course, in the remote future, we can also imagine the emergence of many new religious traditions, as our descendants construct and tell entirely new world stories in their migrations through our corner of the galaxy.

About the Author: David Christian is a Russian historian and the founding President of the International Big History Association. His latest books are *Origin Story: A Big History of Everything* (2018), *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia, Vol. 2* (2018) and *Future Stories: What's Next?* (2022).

