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BIOTECHNOLOGY, COSMOLOGY, AND THE COMMON GOOD

Stephen Bede Scharper, Ph.D.

**Assistant Professor
Department for the Study of Religion
St. Michael's College**

"The underlying argument of the biotech industry is that Mother Nature is incompetent."

--Brewster Kneen, Farmageddon

In the opening chapter of Genesis, the great "First Act" of Creation in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God creates vegetation, "plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth" (Genesis 1: 11). God further creates the living creatures, "each according to its kind," and sees that all of this "was good"--days before God created the human.

Today, for the first time in human history, species are being created, not by divine fiat, but by human hands, and usually by powerful, multi-national corporations intent on scoring huge profits, not for the commonweal, but for their shareholders. While these corporate concerns argue, as did their Green Revolution forebears, that their biotechnologies will help feed a hungry world, one may rightly be suspicious of their sincerity. Monsanto, for example, the providers of a bovine growth hormone (rBST) approved for use in the USA but not in Canada, is not a charity, but a multi-billion dollar for-profit company. Their mandate is principally to make money, not to fight hunger. In the swirl of controversy about biotechnology, it is important to make clear the agenda of those pushing the technologies.

Odd as it may sound, one way of achieving clarity in the biotechnology debate is to examine one's cosmology. While engendering images of lab-coated, pocket-protected professors with thick glasses, or New Age, tie-died moon dancers amidst a whiff of ganja, cosmology nevertheless lies at the core of a culture's collective self-understanding.

Scientifically, cosmology entails discerning the laws of the universe and viewing it as an ordered whole. Philosophically, as a branch of metaphysics, cosmology examines the provenance and progression of the created world, and the role of the human within it.

Religiously, cosmology also explores the origins of and human place within the universe, yet it views the cosmos as a sacred space, and strives to articulate the over-arching goal of society--as well as the organizing principles, motivating power, and ultimate purpose or telos of our lives.

Through the Cosmos documentary series by the late Carl Sagan, the best-selling *A Brief History of Time* by British physicist Stephen Hawking, as well as the arresting photos from the Hubble spacescope, cosmology has been propelled in recent years out of observatories and dance circles and into mainstream imagination.

Yet recent scientific discovery is not the only cosmological catapult. Our contemporary ecological situation has also pushed cosmological queries to the cultural front burner. As we slow cook our climate with fossil fuel emissions, delete thousands of species annually, cut down our remaining old growth forests, and watch as thousands of children, from Walkerton, Ontario to Cairo, Egypt, die daily owing to contaminated water, basic cosmological questions float to our lips: Is this progress? What is our purpose here? What on Earth are we collectively doing to our planet, our only home?

The Cosmology of Consumerism

In pondering these questions, two Roman Catholic thinkers, mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme and "geologist" Thomas Berry, enchanted by the unfolding of the cosmos and the awe-inspiring mystery of the other-than-human world, claim that the emerging universe, which should be the our basic cosmological framework, has been eclipsed by another cosmology: consumerism.

Using a cultural and scientific lens, rather than sociological or economic analysis, Berry and Swimme aver that global consumerism has become our reigning worldview. Rather than viewing the universe as a "communion of subjects," as many religious traditions traditionally have, we see it a "collection of objects." What is our role here? – To acquire as much "stuff" as possible. What is the goal of society? - To have the highest level of mass consumption attainable. Why did God make me? So I can enter the cash-based consumer economy and be competitive in the global market place.

Consumerism has become our new catechism.

Echoing the work of George Gerbner at the Annenberg Center of Communication, University of Pennsylvania, Swimme and Berry note that for the first time in human history, the main stories of our time are told not by parents, grandparents, elders, teachers, or religious leaders, but by global corporations who want to sell us their products. With television on 7 hours a day in the average North American home, children will have viewed over 3 years of advertisements by the age of 18--almost a university length education in consumerism before they reach university.

For Berry and Swimme, the awesome delight of a magnificent sunset, or the sense of wonder we feel when gazing at an array of stars on a soft summer night, are the sources of the psychic energy, the affective power, needed to extricate ourselves from our pathological quest to consume and deface the natural world. Yet these experiences are being increasingly rendered unattainable as pollution smears our twilight horizon, and the ever-increasing urban and suburban glare white out our evening skies. (It was claimed that during a major blackout in Los Angeles several years ago, police received dozens of calls from citizens reporting strange lights in the night sky; it was the first time they had seen stars.)

Biotechnology comes from the heartland of the cosmology of consumerism. In this worldview, the elements of nature, as engendered by the divine, "each according to its kind," are flawed. It must be improved upon. It is a "collection of objects" to be manipulated for profit and mass consumption, rather than a "communion of subjects" to be treated with respect.

In this outlook, tomatoes must be bred with pig hormones so that they will ripen uniformly and be tough enough to withstand mechanical harvesting--ethical and religious concerns (Is such a tomato Kosher? for example), health concerns for the human and larger biotic community, and the integrity of the tomato itself, all concerns under the umbrella of the common good--are banished to the back burner.

Discerning our own cosmological vision may help us as we attempt to assess and respond to the new world--and vision of the world--that biotechnology presents.

Stephen Bede Scharper, who teaches religion and ecology at St. Michael's College, Toronto, is co-author of The Green Bible and author of Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment.

*Stephen Bede Scharper, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department for the Study of Religion
St. Michael's College
81 St. Mary Street
Toronto, ON M5S 1J4
(416) 926-1300, ext. 3288 (phone)
(416) 926-7276 (fax)*



National Catholic Rural Life Conference
4625 Beaver Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199
(515) 270-2634
email address: ncrlc@mchsi.com
website: www.ncrlc.com

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