

**Transforming Axial Paradigms
in Seizing an Ecological Civilization**

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Introduction

This paper was presented at the conference, “Seizing an Alternative: Toward an Ecological Civilization” held at Claremont, June 4-7, 2015. What I wish to do here is to share briefly the findings of my doctoral dissertation which I undertook under the guidance of John Cobb, David Griffin, Dean Freudenberger and John Quiring at the Claremont School of Theology, California.

My dissertation was published as a book entitled, *Green History of Religion*.¹ Our study sought to show the root causes for the rise of, what Karl Jaspers calls, the “Axial Age.”² Jaspers posited that the axial age transpired during the first millennium BCE when prominent religious luminaries emerged on the world stage. These religious leaders, together with their cohorts become centers of new religious movements and schools of philosophies. Many of these Living World Religions continue to survive and wield enormous influence over contemporary societies and cultures. John Hick underscores that “Nothing of comparably novel significance has happened in the religious life of humanity since.”³

A number of scholars of religions since Jaspers have sought to expand on Jaspers’ thesis and answer why and how the axial religions and philosophies developed without any concord with

¹ Anand Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion* (Bangalore, India: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2006).

² Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (Hew Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

³ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 31.

similar movements in diverse parts of the world. While every scholar sought to expound the phenomenon from their own academic expertise, no one offered a credible, all-encompassing rationale as to why axial movements rose in the first place. However, on one question these scholars were in agreement. It was around the phenomenon of, what Max Weber called, the “religious rejection of the world,”⁴ – conversely, the “human alienation from the world” – a sentiment common to all axial religions and philosophies. This was diametrically contrary to the virtual absence of “world rejection” found in primal societies that had lasted for nearly 2 million years prior to the advent of axial times.⁵

We sought to answer why this was so. We began to suspect that the “human alienation from the world” becoming the foundational premise of axial thoughts and traditions must have had something to do with how ancient societies experienced the world during the millennia preceding axial times. Bewildering catastrophes must have swept across the globe leading to synchronized collapse of pre-axial societies and ancient civilizations. Might those unnerving experiences have accentuated human disenchantment with nature leading to the “religious rejection of the world?”

Nonetheless, I had to attest my hunch with hard evidences from science and the history of ancient world. I sought the help of my scientist friend, Anand Gnanadesikan,⁶ an Oceanographer at the Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Lab in Princeton. Anand researched and provided me with scores of books, resources and especially climate models for the last 12,000 years. Our enquiry

⁴ Max Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions” in *From Max Weber*, ed. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946); Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-traditional world* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1970), 22-23.

⁵ Ibid. Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, 22-23.

⁶ Anand Gnanadesikan and his wife Amalia Gnanadesikan helped me with the research and getting the book, *Green History of Religion* published. Both Anand and Amalia now teach at John Hopkins University, Maryland.

led us to look at the planet-wide changes – climatic and environmental – that were in the offing during the millennia preceding the rise of the axial age. We were pleasantly surprised to find that our suspicion might after all be true. Our findings showed that from about 12,000 BCE, the planet went through a warming trend causing extreme climate changes all across the globe. It disrupted primal societies and their ways of life and successively displaced ancient pastoral and agrarian communities. The warming trend intensified rapidly quickening the rise and fall of ancient civilizations at the core centers. The tumultuous social and ecological ethos of the pre-axial times became conducive for the formation of world-denying motifs that became the bedrock of all post-axial religions and philosophies. This, in a nutshell, is the thesis of *Green History of Religion*.

We concluded the volume with a call for a paradigm shift of all world-negating religious traditions and philosophies; but the study did not go on to propose the direction or the shape of the paradigm shift, much less how the shift may transform axial traditions. Also the volume was limited to the study of faith traditions and philosophies that grew in and around Ancient Middle East, Levant, Greece and Egypt. It did not deal with religious traditions and philosophies that grew and flourished on the Indian subcontinent, in Persia, China and beyond. In this respect, *Green History of Religion* is an unfinished project.

Nevertheless, the volume did make some important contributions to the ongoing conversations on axial traditions. Writing a review, John Cobb acknowledged the value of the book for the study of history of religion in these words.

This is a truly groundbreaking book! Despite all our talk of overcoming dualism, our historical and systematic accounts of the history of religion rarely take the relation of human beings and their natural environment seriously into account. . . . I myself certainly ignored nature in my account until I was educated by Veeraraj through working with him on his dissertation. That experience was revelatory for me. . . . *Taking the changing relation of human beings to their natural environment into account deeply transforms the understanding of the history of religion.*⁷ [Emphasis mine].

Cobb went on to invite scholars of different disciplines to take on parallel projects. I trust that the students of religion will take Cobb's invitation seriously. I personally feel that the study of the History of Religion today is deeply flawed. Scholars who study the axial age have yet to fully embrace what Cobb has been advocating for.

Understanding the axial phenomenon requires a multi-disciplinary approach.⁸ Scholars like Robert Bellah, John Cobb, John Hick and others have firmly established the historical, social, psychological and theological paradigms of the axial age. Their findings aid us in mapping the evolution of religion corresponding to the advance of human societies from primal to archaic, to axial to post-axial stages. To these established paradigms, we wish to add another layer of foundation for the study of religion namely, human-world relations, existence and experience of the pre-axial and post-axial times.

Any student of history would observe the tell-tale signs of axial revolution or what we wish to call, the "axial paradigm shift." Axial movements emerged all over the globe independent of

⁷ *Creative Transformation*, vol. 16, No. 2, Center for Process Studies, Claremont, CA, (Spring 2007), 26-27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, 9-12.

other centers; there was virtually no contact or communications between those movements during those seminal times. The Axial age was one of the tumultuous periods in human history. We observe the synchronized collapse of ancient civilization, city-states and empires one after the other. We also witness the rapid surge of organized warfare. The “religious rejection of the world,” conversely, “human alienation from the world” became the foundational premise of all axial religions. Corollaries of this thought mode, “cosmic homelessness,” “ethereal cosmic optimism,” and “salvation/liberation” became their gospel. The “world-acceptance” of the primal world which had lasted for nearly 40,000 years was usurped by world-rejecting religious traditions.

Strangely though, scholars who studied axial phenomenon did not connect the dots, because their approach to the study of the history of religion was highly anthropocentric and dualistic. They rarely took the world of nature seriously; and therefore, much of their works read rather shallow.⁹ What would become apparent in this presentation is that we can no longer ignore the importance of human-world relations for the study of the history of religion; without this context, we cannot envision a hopeful future for the Planet. The question is, “How shall we transform those axial paradigms in which we are brought up and move toward seizing an Ecological Civilization?” This presentation seeks to address this question as outlined here.

1. Global climate change and the rise of axial revolution: A Historic Paradigm Shift
2. Gestalts, Archetypes and the Religious Rejection of the World
3. World Loyalty – A Religion for an Ecological Civilization

⁹ John B. Cobb, Jr. *Theological Reminiscences* (Claremont: Process Century Press, 2014), 129.

I. Global climate change and the rise of axial revolution: A Historic Paradigm Shift

As John Cobb says, “Taking the changing relation of human beings to their natural environment into account deeply transforms the understanding of the history of religion.” Axial revolution, we submit, was one of the major paradigm shifts¹⁰ that have ever occurred in human history. It ushered in profound structural and paradigmatic changes in the modes of religious thoughts and human existence the world over. The revolution fundamentally skewed the world-affirming human-world relations that had lasted for nearly two million years. While the axial shift elevated the status of humans above nature, it degraded and disenchanting the world completely.

Karl Jaspers did not recognize the adverse effects of the axial revolution; neither did he have the luxury of consulting planetary history, geological records, and climatological almanacs that could have informed him of the root causes for human negativity toward nature. He was, instead smitten by the sudden crop of religious luminaries and philosophers who appeared on the scene. Nevertheless, scholars of religion have come to agree with Jaspers on the significance of the axial age for the study of the History of Religion. John Cobb and John Hick offer these sweeping assessments of axial revolution.

John Cobb:

The cultures and religions to which this new existence gave rise are the axial cultures and religions, which still dominate the world. The axial men who embody this existence and participate in these cultures are ourselves.¹¹

¹⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).

¹¹ John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 53.

John Hick:

[I]n this period all the major religious options, constituting the major possible ways of conceiving the ultimate, were identified and established and . . . nothing of comparably novel significance has happened in the religious life of humanity since.¹²

In terms of religious worldviews and practice, it was indeed a wholesale paradigm shift that has not been seen any time prior or after. What prompted these stimulations, scholars were hard put to identify. John Hick, writing in *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989) could see that there was a common cause but could not precisely define it.

Hick writes,

It is the concept of a concentration of events which, although without exact boundaries, form *a large-scale event in its own right*. Because of the magnitude and widespread incidence of these changes we must suppose that *it was made possible by a new stage in human development, occurring at much the same time in these different ancient cultures*, . . . [T]he whole subject of the axial age, its causes, nature and consequences, is ripe for further research and clarifications.¹³ [Emphasis mine].

We hold Hick's hypothesis on the axial age, although quite impressive, rather abstruse. What is this "large scale event in its own right" that Hick talks about, but could not put his finger on?

Scholar of religion from Jaspers to Hick have pointed to these phenomena and offered differing, sometimes conflicting thesis. But if we press these scholars and ask why axial movements emerged simultaneously over the world and why all these emerging new faiths and philosophies

¹² John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 31.

seem to hold the rejection of the world as their central premise, we are at a dead end. It baffles me to this day, why no scholar ever connected the dots until *Green History of Religion* was published. Of course, except for John Hick, the environmental crisis as we know today was not a live social issue at the time when these scholars published their works on the Axial Age. What prompted this shift was the crux of the thesis of *Green History of Religion*.

Green History of Religion is a new and growing multidisciplinary discipline. It does not rely solely on history and allied social sciences. Like the science of ecology, Green History and Green History of Religion are not independent disciplines; they draw resources from many life and hard sciences – cosmology, astronomy, astrobiology, planetary sciences, geography, geology, climatology, paleontology, archeology, anthropology, animal, plant and human ecology, etc. – and especially the evolutionary histories of bioregions in which humans are natural components.¹⁴ While we approach our query with broad strokes of cosmic proportion, we would need to narrow these down to specific habitats. Habitats are dynamic entities, constituted by multifarious realities, forces and dimensions. Narrating a coherent comprehensive story of any habitats as they existed and changed over the past 12,000 is by no means a simple task. Paul Shepard says, “[I]deas have habitats in which they originate and prosper. The idea of history is . . . a Western invention whose central theme is the rejection of habitat.”¹⁵ The question is: Can we observe and trace the axial negativity toward nature in the processes of the habitats in which it transpired?

¹⁴ Ibid., Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, 10.

¹⁵ Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco, California, Sierra Club Books, 1982), 47

The two climate charts presented here amply illustrate our thesis. The first one is about the global climate change and the temperature variations of the last 18,000 years since the close of the last Ice Age. The second one interposes the historical events that transpired in the Bible lands on the climate history of the region. Our interest here lies mainly in the environmental changes observed at the core centers of civilization, from the last glacial period – from about 12,000 to 1,000 BCE. Available evidences show that there were abrupt climate changes between 15,000 and 9000 BCE. These were produced by changes in the orientation of the Earth's axis – the tilt of the axis of rotation of the Earth relative to the Earth-Sun orbit. The Sun-Earth distance decreased in northern summer while the axial tilt increased.

The Earth's orbital variations are influenced by three factors:

1. Eccentricity – the degree of ellipticity of its orbit round the Sun.
2. The angle of tilt – the orientation of the axis of rotation with respect to its orbital path.
3. Precession of the equinoxes – the planet's wobbles around the angle of tilt.

The Earth wobbles like a spinning top as it precesses around its axis of rotation. The degree of change is forced upon the Earth by the gravitational attraction of other bodies in the solar system – the sun, the moon, and the planets. These changes take place gradually over a long period and affect the quantity of the solar radiation received by particular regions of the planet, and they are predictable. About 10,000 years ago, the inclination of earth's rotational axis relative to the ecliptic plane was about 24.5° , and the closest approach of the orbiting Earth to the Sun (perihelion) occurred in July. This condition resulted in about 8% more solar radiation reaching the northern hemisphere in the summer and about 8% less in winter compared to the present situation of a 23.5° inclination angle and a January perihelion. Since about 9,000 BCE, these

levels have gradually approached modern values. Although these changes may seem infinitesimal in themselves, over long periods they can have enormous impact on climate and weather patterns.

Our narration briefly traces the general trends of the climatic changes of the Holocene (wholly recent) age which began around 12,000 BCE at the conclusion of the last Ice Age.¹⁶ During this period the Northern Hemisphere underwent a resurgence of warm and wet weather conditions. The changes enhanced the amplitude of the seasonal cycles of summertime land-ocean temperature contrasts, and thereby strengthened northern summer monsoons. This accentuated the seasonality on the Indian subcontinent and in China where strong monsoon patterns were established. Increased precipitation induced lush vegetation, which developed thick soil cover. Europe gained extensive forest cover that lasted for nearly 5000 years. In Africa and Arabia, many lakes reached their highest level. The Sahara region was a vast savanna covered by annual grasses and low shrubs. A number of lakes and water holes made possible the existence of semi-permanent human settlements and wadi¹⁷ activities all over the present-day Sahara and Arabia. The presence of animals allowed for widespread hunting.¹⁸

All this changed between 6000 and 3000 BCE, when the general climatic conditions became similar to the present day. Solar radiation gradually decreased to present values with the progression of the equinoctial precession. This long term cooling and drying from mid-Holocene was triggered by subtle changes in the Earth's orbit. The annual amplitude of the temperature

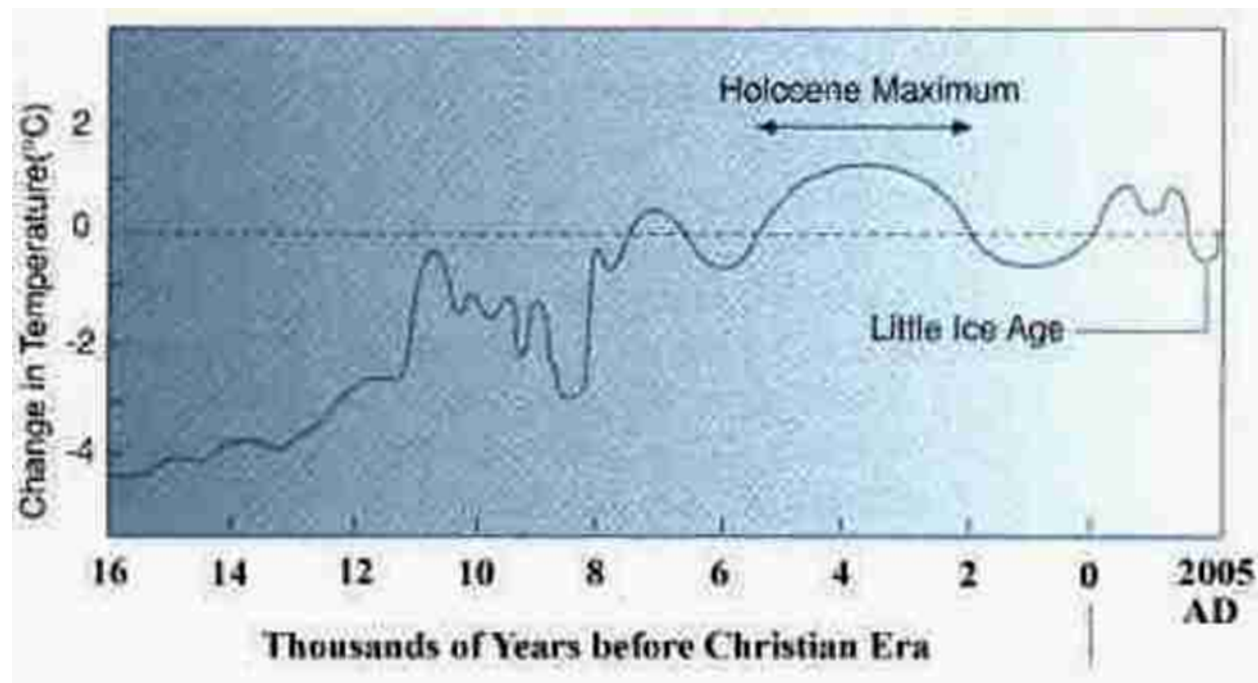
¹⁶ Ibid., Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, Chapter 7. See also, Appendix, "The Evolution of Human Societies during Holocene epoch,"

¹⁷ Wadi - valley of a stream in desert regions that is usually dry except during the rainy season that often forms an oasis.

¹⁸ Ibid., Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, 85-86.

range shrank, resulting in decreased precipitation. From 4000 to 3000 BCE, aridity spread all across Middle East, ruining ancient civilizations. In India, precipitation decreased in the river watershed after 4000-3500 BCE. Nile River runoff decreased considerably and many fresh water lakes in the Sahara and Egypt vanished completely.

Temperature changes on earth during the past 18,000 years since 2005¹⁹



Archeologists, climatologists and Green Historians point out that the climatic change of the mid-Holocene epoch was very severe and may have contributed to the synchronous disruptions of civilization at the core centers – from Egypt to Greece, across the Near East and into the Indus Valley. We also notice the beginnings of political unrests and the rise of organized warfare all over Levant and the Fertile Crescent. Agriculture was abandoned all across the core regions due

¹⁹ <http://www.faculty.ucr.edu/~legneref/bronze/climate.htm> [accessed 4/25/2015].

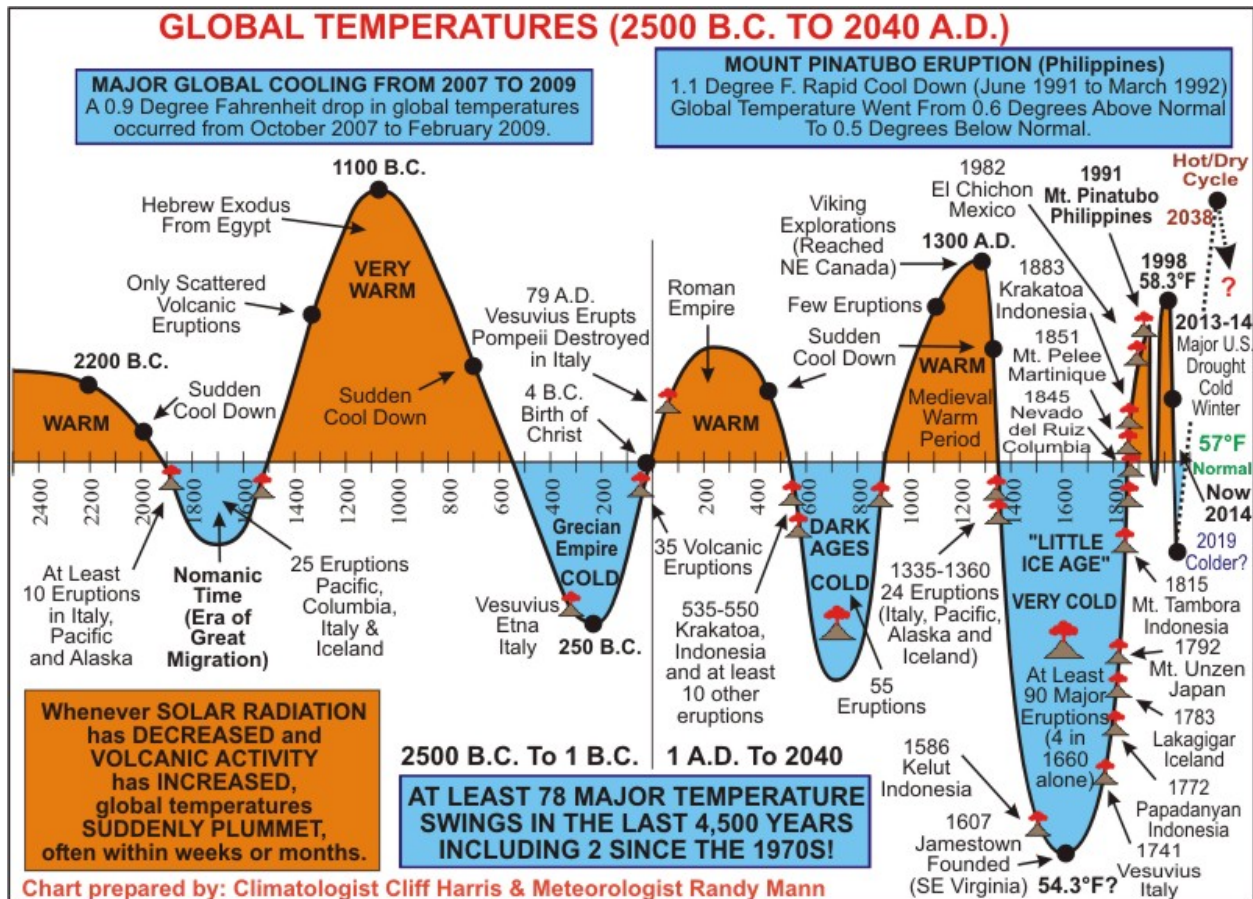
to widespread desiccation and desertification.²⁰ The drought and aridity spurred mass migration and military operations in the afflicted regions.²¹ Unusual sandstorms swept across Eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamian regions. Sandstorms are very destructive. Prolonged sandstorms can blanket and bury towns and settlements within a matter of days. Coupled with this, the plagues of desert locusts afflicted the arid regions of Africa and the Fertile Crescent since the mid-Holocene epoch. Plagues and arid conditions continued into the first millennium BCE. The desertification of these regions led to the eventual collapse of the city-states and nudged them toward imperial modes of expansions in which we witness the rise and fall of many empires and the advance of axial movements and the concretization of anti-nature stances.²² It was indeed a global crisis of epic proportion unparalleled in the history of humanity.

²⁰ Ibid., Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, 86-94.

²¹ H. Hühner Dalfes, George Kukla, and Harvey Weiss. eds. *Third Millennium BC Climate Change and Old World Collapse* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1997), 606.

²² Ibid., Veeraraj, 86-94. Also see H. Hühner Dalfes, George Kukla and Harvey Weiss. Eds. *Third Millennium BC Climate Change and Old World Collapse* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1997).

Global Temperature Trends From 2500 B.C. To 2040 A.D.²³



As Green Historians, we invoke this large-scale barometer of cosmic proportion that would justify the rise of axial movements in their habitats with all its variations all across the ancient world. We sought to emboss the axial story on a cosmological, geological, climatological, planetary and bioregional histories. If we concur with the findings of these scholars like Jaspers,

²³ Cliff Harris and Randy Mann, "Global Temperature Trends From 2500 B.C. To 2040 A.D." http://www.longrangeweather.com/global_temperatures.htm [accessed, 4-25-2015].

Bellah, Cobb, Hick and others, delineating the rise of the axial movements on the climatological almanacs is rather propitious. By doing so, we are now able to read the axial movements and their impact on the evolution of human societies, religions and philosophies against the backdrop of the planet wide changes. As we can see from the chart (Cliff Harris and Randy Mann), severe global warming trends afflicted ancient centers of civilizations from about 4000 to 1000 BCE. Notably, Egypt suffered one of its worst food shortages due to low annual flooding of the Nile that resulted in a decline in crop yields. The story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 39-50) is a classic legend of the mass migration of pastoral and agrarian societies from the drought stricken parched desert ecotones of Levant in search of arable lands and savannas around the river basins.²⁴ We also see waves of Exodus events occurring possibly around 1200-1100 BCE when the planet experienced one of the hottest spells of the past 12,000 years. That leads us to conclude that the planet-wide climate and environmental changes of the pre-axial times were severe and caused the rise of axial revolutions. It does give credence to our thesis that the world-negating motifs and myths might after all were formed and shaped in an epoch that suffered one of the most tumultuous social upheavals in human history spawned by extreme weather conditions and dire environmental catastrophes.

Going by the extreme weather conditions and climate changes we experience in our present times, we can safely assume that we are in for a prolonged period of drought and environmental catastrophes as experienced by pre-axial societies. Nevertheless, the planetary history of the past 12,000 years informs us that the cycles of good and bad times may continue into the distant

²⁴ Ibid., Veeraraj, 209-210.

future. Scientists believe that the present age is an inter-glacial period – a warm period between two ice ages. Climatologist Cliff Harris and Meteorologist Randy Mann predict,

By the end of this 21st Century, a cool down may occur that could ultimately lead to expanding glaciers worldwide, even in the mid-latitudes. Based on long-term climatic data, these major ice ages have recurred about every 11,500 years. The last extensive ice age was approximately 11,500 years ago, so we may be due again sometime soon.²⁵

While it is by no means certain when the next ice age will emerge, there is every reason to suppose that the cycles of glacial and interglacial will repeat once again.

The moral of the story – the story of the climate changes of the pre-axial times – is that the environmental catastrophes of the pre-axial and axial times were due in large part to the natural cycles of the planet-wide climate changes. Humans had very little to do with these disasters. Human societies were merely responding to the changes they encountered in their bioregions. The crisis of course overwhelmed ancient societies. These societies had hardly any understanding of the planetary processes and climate forces that were affecting their habitats. The contemporary global warming and climate changes (unlike the environmental crisis of the axial epoch) are due both to natural cycles of planetary processes as well as human intervention in nature. If the burning of fossil fuels, massive deforestations, soil erosion and population explosion continue unabated we will hasten Earth's warming trends in the next several decades to the detriment of human survival and possibly annihilate all life forms on the planet much sooner than the onset of the next ice-age.

²⁵ Ibid., Cliff Harris and Randy Mann.

II. Gestalts, Archetypes and the Religious Rejection of the World

Religion trades in meanings, sifting through myriads of gestalts acquired from ecological and social settings, selectively employing them to construct archetypal propositions.²⁶ Every religion seeks to comprehend the universe and the immediate habitat for positing a *raison d'être* for human presence and experience within it. John Hick defines religion “as a self-regulating response of the human animal to the pressures generated by its particular niche within the biological system.”²⁷ Nature, the biological system can be apprehended in various ways. Human engagement with the land takes many different forms – from artistic appreciation to ruthless exploitation for economic gains. Some of the vital components that go into the makeup of human-world relations and the concomitant worldviews are land,²⁸ topophilia,²⁹ biophilia,³⁰ landscape gestalts, human ecology and climatic conditions. The pressures on human societies and human-world relations exerted by particular biological niches also shape the worldviews and the archetypes of the collective consciousness. Gestalts from diverse sources that go into the making of any particular religious worldview endow it with the unique vitality of its respective archetypal images as well as provide the motifs and modus operandi for human-world relations and existence.

²⁶We have tossed here some terms -- gestalts, archetypes, collective consciousness, paradigm shift etc. without much discussion or our connotations of these terms in this presentation. Readers are encouraged to consult references cited here. See David Ray Griffin, (ed.) *Archetypal Process: Self and Divine in Whitehead, Jung and Hillman* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989).

²⁷ Ibid., Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 1.

²⁸ Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 97-117.

²⁹ Yu-fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

³⁰ Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). *Biophilia* – an innate, genetically based disposition to love animals, plants, landscapes with trees, open spaces, rivers, lakes, snow capped mountains, rolling hills, prairies etc.

Primal societies, for the most part encounter nature in providential ways. They appropriate what is given in their immediate environment. Those providential human-world experiences endow them with munificent gestalts of world-acceptance. Variations of these archetypes are observed markedly expressed in pastoral and agrarian myths and cults. The landscape gestalts of herding-nomads roaming vast stretches of savannas differ markedly from those of the sedentary farming communities. And each of these modes of existence produces its own unique brand of myths and cultic traditions. Pastoral people invariably invoke sky gods who tend to be males and warrior-like, while the agrarian communities opt for down to earth fertility cults fashioned around mothering feminine deities. Thus we may talk about savanna, alpine, arboreal, riverine, urban gestalts, so on and so forth, each with its own distinct myths, deities and cults.³¹ Why is Christianity different from Hinduism? Or Buddhism from Confucianism? Among other things, each one renders the ethos of their habitats as they existed in their formative years. Accordingly we might broadly generalize and hold the Christian faith, scaffold by Western metaphysics as largely predisposed by savanna gestalts unique to the ancient farming-herding societies. Edward O. Wilson says, “That given a completely free choice, people gravitate statistically toward a savanna-like environment.”³² Eastern metaphysics, on the other hand, especially those of the Indian subcontinent, largely reflects the alpine gestalts of the mighty Himalayas and the arboreal gestalts of the jungles of Videha and Uttarakhand of Himachal Pradesh.³³ The great holy writs of the Hindu faith – Vedas, Upanishads, Aranyakas, Epics, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas, Tantras, etc.

³¹ Ibid., Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, 12-16.

³² Ibid., Wilson, *Biophilia*, 112.

³³ Videha jungles are in the regions on the north of Ganga-Yamuna span of rivers where *Aranyakas* (forest texts) were purported to have been composed. Both *Upanishads* and *Aranyakas* were composed in late Vedic period around 500 BCE.

are said to have been composed along the foot hills of the Himalayas and the great plains of the River Ganges. Thus Bible, Upanishads and Aranyakas may, accordingly, be construed as shaped by their respective gestalts,³⁴ accruing and bestowing unique archetypal properties, images and motifs of their bioregion. The multifarious sacred images of the popular Hinduism are nothing but the manifestations of monistic and pluralistic archetypes that reflect the Indian subcontinent's rich array of environment.³⁵

However prairie gestalts are not the only metaphysics that scaffolds Christian faith. Gestalts of the great deserts that straddle the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn – also add to its vital archetypal dynamics. Desert gestalts, by their very dynamics, are antagonistic to savannah gestalts. We can to some extent generalize that most human progress and misfortunes to this day can be traced to the thoughts and strategies formed at the ecotones of the sandy deserts during the first few millennia BCE. The deserts of the ancient Near East formed the backdrop for the articulation of these inimitable ideals and ideas. What in the desert landscapes, may we ask, that was so incendiary for fermenting and formatting world-denying thoughts? Paul Shepard writes,

The desert is a powerful unique sensorium. Silence and emptiness are the ambiguous descriptions of sounds and landforms. The desert is at once a place of sensory deprivation and awesome overload – too little life, too much heat, too little water, too much sky. Its cool shadows offer “thermal delight,” and yet the desert evokes the terrors of the inferno. Its distance and scale, the sweep between horizons and the loftiness of

³⁴ Ibid., Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, 12-16. Also see, Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 509-512.

³⁵ John B. Cobb, Jr. *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1990) 62-63.

stars, its winds and mirages, its hidden life and conspicuous shapes seem at once to dwarf and to emphasize the human figure. Its sensory impacts is profoundly stimulating and disturbing, a massive shock to the human limbic system – the neural basis of emotional response – which seems to demand some logic or interpretation.³⁶

Did these brooding ethea engender the great monotheistic religions of the world? In spite of their eerie antagonism toward nature, these monotheistic faiths have lasted into the present day without losing steam. Some of these thoughts and practices that developed during the axial age became lethal not only for human views of the environment, but also for human societies. As Robert Bellah says, these traditions uphold “the phenomenon of religious rejection of the world characterized by an extremely negative evaluation of man and society and the exaltation of another realm of reality as alone true and infinitely valuable.”³⁷ To identify the roots causes of those nefarious motifs, we would need to extract those gestalts, archetypes, universal meanings and symbols buried beneath the collective unconsciousness of the axial mindset.

From the two climate charts we presented above, we can make some broad generalization about the environmental crisis of the pre-axial times. From about 9000 to 5000 BCE, the Planet experienced one of the most flourishing epochs of its history, with copious rain falls, increasing forest cover, overflowing lakes and waterholes, lush vegetation and proliferation of game animals roaming the vast stretches of the savannas. It was an epoch when humans for the most part lived in harmony with nature as hunter-gatherers, gradually transitioning to agrarian-pastoral ways of life. If ever there was a legend that rendered this epoch vividly, it is the Garden of Eden

³⁶ Ibid., Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, 47-48.

³⁷ Ibid., Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, 22.

story. It paints a scene of a world brimming with life, vitality and serenity. During this epoch, human societies were sparse and scattered; game was plenty; plant food was easy to collect. No violence of humans upon humans, and absolutely no anabasis of any sort. Overall life was tranquil and laid-back. The ecological realities of the early Holocene epoch – its nourishing satiating human-world existence – was extolled in the archetypal consciousness of the archaic societies.

All this changed rather abruptly. During the mid-Holocene epoch, from about 5000 to 1000 BCE, the Planet went through one of the warmest spells of the past 10,000 years. The regions around the core centers turned into scorching infernos; life became unbearable. The once benevolent Earth turned vicious and unyielding. [Genesis 3:17-19].³⁸ Droughts, famines, pestilences, plagues and wars of all types proliferated. Vast stretches of savannas, lakes and waterholes vanished; deserts advanced. Mass exodus of pastoral and agrarian communities from the parched savannas to the fertile river basins ensued. Ancient civilizations – fortified citadels and cities – collapsed one after the other. A world which once was benevolent to humans turned vile, a fiery serpent. The legendary homicide during archaic times – the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, is a moral tale of this dreadful epoch. [Genesis Chapters 2 & 3]. What was ironic was the abrupt change of the scenery – from the serene secure savanna landscapes of Eden to the culverts of human depravity and savagery. The mid-Holocene environment was ominously cataclysmic; its gestalts were grotesquely embossed over the benevolent gestalts of Eden. The

³⁸ Genesis 3:17-19. "To Adam he [God] said, 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'"

simmering conflicts between the antinomies – the gestalts of Eden and the scorching deserts of Sinai – boiled over. These remained unsolved for long in the collective consciousness of the pre-axial societies. Humans could no longer count on the providence of nature or invoke the benevolent spirits of the wilderness, cajoling their images and idols. In this milieu transpired all modes of thoughts of discontent and angst with life in general with all corollaries of the ignominious social and political institutions of the axial times.

The time was ripe for the axial luminaries to ascend on the scene and propose alternate ways of coping through the troubled times. Human acumens for religious reflections and propositions are not wholly about dejection and rejection; they also offer hope and promise, imaginative or mythical. The resourcefulness of these luminaries was in their ability to imagine utopian myths of good life, pain and pleasure. Their worldviews entertained apocalyptic notions, paradise, instinctual gratification dominated by “pleasure principle,”³⁹ and the retributive justice of heaven and hell. These are more pronounced in the monotheistic traditions spawned in the Levant and Ancient Near East than anywhere else. It was this mood of human alienation from the world that engendered the notion of “cosmic homelessness,” and it became the bedrock of all axial traditions. Archetypes of Eden were recast as utopian myths attainable in a world beyond this world. Among other things, three novel ideas, proposed by the axial prophets turned the whole religious enterprise in a new direction, away from “world acceptance” and “world-loyalty” to notions of “world-rejection” and “cosmic homelessness.”

A. From the Many to the One – A flawed Monotheism:

³⁹ Ibid. Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, 63.

Modern human beings [Homo sapiens sapiens] began their sojourn on this planet with a pale notion of what Whitehead calls, “World-loyalty.”⁴⁰ Scholars of religion have variously termed this as world-acceptance.⁴¹ Since primal times, human societies have adopted diverse modes of human-world relations, beginning with “world-acceptance,” steadily plunging toward birthing all sorts of dualistic theistic ideals, from sky gods to earth deities. Needless to say, there was a steady deterioration and corruption of theistic myths, degenerating ultimately into divinization of human beings. John Cobb terms these as “lessor loyalties” and Mark Johnston, as “idolatries.”⁴² None of these lesser loyalties measure up to the ideals of world-loyalty prevalent in primal societies. These lesser loyalties do not deserve our devotion and support. The ultimate decadence of all lesser loyalties is the elevation of human beings as authentic images and proxies of the Supreme Being.

The famous historian Arnold Toynbee wrote in 1973,

Some of the major maladies of the present day world – in particular the recklessly extravagant consumption of nature’s irreplaceable treasures, and the pollution of those of them that man has not already devoured – can be traced back in the last analysis to a religious cause and this cause is the rise of monotheism.⁴³

Why would Toynbee level such a serious charge against monotheism? Conservative Biblical scholars have in the past celebrated the movement from polytheism to monotheism as a great

⁴⁰Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 58-9.

⁴¹Ibid., Bella, *Beyond Belief*, 22-23.

⁴²Ibid., Mark Johnston, “Internal criterion of falsehood,” [John Quiring, page 1].

⁴³Arnold Toynbee, “The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis,” David and Eileen Spring, *Ecology and Religion in History* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1974), 146.

cultural advance, an intellectual breakthrough. They claim that the Abrahamic tribesmen, somehow, stumbled upon this notion intuitively by some divine providence.

The transition from animism to polytheism to monotheism took several millennia and the process varied from habitat to habitat in pace and form. Ancient Egyptians were perhaps the earliest ones in history to have experimented with an archaic version of monotheism.⁴⁴ Akhenaten, the Pharaoh Amenophis IV (ca. 1352-1338) is credited with advancing an archaic version of monotheism, employing it to unify warring Egyptian city-states under his rule. For several reasons, Akhenaten's monotheism failed on his demise. First, Egyptians were mostly dependent on the providential bounties of the Nile River. The riverine gestalts of the Nile delta grounded the Egyptians firmly to their land. The land was largely spared the environmental calamities of its neighboring desert kingdoms. Secondly, Akhenaten claimed that he is the Son of Aten, the sun god. The cult of Aten, (the so called Amarna religion, from the name of Akhenaten's capital city) did not institute any religious functionaries – priests, prophets and scribes – to propagate and perpetuate the cult. Other than himself, his wife Nefertiti, and Tutankhamen their son, no proxies for Aten existed. Akhenaten's monotheism died with him and the cult of Aten was effaced throughout Egypt. Egypt reverted back to the pre-Akhenaten polytheism – the Amon-Ra fertility rites. A footnote to the failed Amarna monotheism is that the Ancient Egypt contributed hardly anything substantial to the rise of the axial mentality. Had Akhenaten's innovations succeeded, Egypt might have been a significant player in the rise of axial revolution.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 246.

⁴⁵ Ibid., Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, 215.

Without going into many details, let me point out just two fallouts from Akhenaten's tryst with monotheism. One, the Israelites, during their sojourn in Egypt, might have been swayed by some residues of Akhenaten's monotheism, but they did not completely buy into it. Instead, Israelites employed the raw force of his monotheism to execute their Exodus from Egypt. It was then that the tenuous monotheism got concretized and engaged solely as a socio-historical ideology unhinged from the world of nature. Unlike the natives of Egypt, Israelites being sojourners in an alien land had an ambiguous relationship with Egypt's environment. Hebrews knew instinctively that Egypt would never assimilate them into its peasantry; they had no love for the savannas of the Nile delta. In fact being slaves to the Egyptians task masters made them utterly detest Nature. They needed to flee from the slavery in Egypt and migrate to Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey. Secondly, Akhenaten's monotheism sought to unleash a war on all nature cults. But that war failed to consummate. History and nature run on alternate paradigms, linear and cyclical. Human history gets compressed into story lines, whereas Nature's processes repeat in endless cycles of creation, transformation and disintegration. Left to itself, Nature would wipe out all markers of history without a trace. That was the case during the pre-axial epochs, especially with Akhenaten's monotheism. Egyptians were inured to the gestalts of tangible ethos of the savannas surrounding the Nile; they could not be sold on being avid believers of Aten, the sizzling sun. Akhenaten's creed died with him. Although Akhenaten's war on nature failed to materialize within Egypt, it was waged unabated beyond its borders. Israelites seized and ran with it, turning it into an ideology for subduing and annihilating the natives of Canaan. Since then monotheism has come to stand for brutal wars,

including the war on nature, the mother of all wars – that has been waged for almost 2 millennia and continues unabated into the present day.

B. Desecration and Disenchantment of Nature

Invariably monotheists are Supersessionists and condescending toward polytheistic cultures. Monotheists view polytheistic societies as reprobates, heathens, infidels, prime targets for invasion and suppression. Relentless assault on these cultures has been the norm wherever monotheism has spread and taken roots, especially in the two-thirds' world. Throughout history monotheists have desecrated the cultic sites, banned fertility rites, smashed idols and images that represented nature in all its multifarious forces. They do so to stamp out native peoples' kinships to their environment. This was and is still the case today especially in two-thirds' world, on the Indian subcontinent, in South East Asia and beyond. Since the colonial times, European colonizers and the missionaries who followed them sought to rid the land of all images, idols, festivals and rituals that celebrated Nature in all its manifold manifestations. And in their place they installed a historic faith that is totally alien to the land, militantly monotheistic and tenuously otherworldly. Monotheism is essentially sterile; it does not concord with the gestalts of the native environments. Whether the invaders were Muslims or Christians, the marauders and colonizers stripped the subcontinent of all sacred powers and went about destroying Nature on which the very livelihood of natives depended.

Nature is now largely desecrated and disenchanting in the Indian mindset. Modern India suffers one of the worst environmental crises found anywhere in the world. The "disenchantment of nature" says David Griffin, "means the denial to nature of all subjectivity, all experiences, all

feeling. Because of this denial, nature is disqualified – it is denied all qualities that are not thinkable apart from experience.”⁴⁶ Desert monotheisms succeeded in stripping Nature of all its powers, feelings and relationality, desacralizing and ripping apart the alters of Mother Earth. All sacred powers once possessed by Earth were now transferred to another realm – the heavenly dwelling place of Father God. The forces of nature became impersonal phenomena and humans were now free to control and manipulate nature without restraint and look for a world beyond this world.⁴⁷

C. Urban Milieus of Axial Revolutions:

Axial development was essentially an urban phenomenon. By the time axial revolutions came around urban civilizations and the imperial advances through anabasis had spread across the globe. The essential ideology of urbanism is the elevation of human history and the rejection of nature. The urbanites outlook on nature was rather ambivalent. Nature was viewed not so much as a sphere of human subsistence, but as an impediment to human advance or an evil force from which humans should flee. Such an ideology was bolstered by views that nature was chaotic, unpredictable and therefore needed to be dominated, controlled and ordered by human ingenuity and interventions. The ancient city of Sumer embodies the essence of urban ideology. Sumerian myths thus came to narrate the divine-human drama against the backdrop of a menacing nature and marauding tribes that needed to be crushed and subdued. Nature was no longer an active partner, but a villain.

⁴⁶ David Ray Griffin, ed., *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 2.

⁴⁷ Lloyd Geering, *The Greening of C Christianity* (Wellington, New Zealand: St. Andrew’s Trust, 2005), 29-30.

Why did the axial revolution occur in the urban context and not elsewhere? What in the urban psychology and gestalt that was conducive to the rise of axial mentality? A cursory survey of the axial luminaries reveals something starkly stereotypical about them. All of them together add substantially to the flowering of the axial movement. But for these luminaries axial revolutions would not have seen the light of day. They had much in common. All of them were males. Most of them lived and worked in cities. Their schooling and skills class them with urban gentry. Even if they spoke about the agrarian-rural life, they did so as urbanites observing the countryside condescendingly. Their views and teachings were tinged by the prevailing values of the urban centers. Although on occasion, they railed against injustice and human evil, they did not create movements that would topple the prevailing social structures and ignominious social institutions. A common theme runs through all their teachings – the world-negation and salvation-liberation as human transformation.⁴⁸ On this score, all axial prophets and philosophers sing in unison. And for this reason, we submit that these axial stars were not original in advancing world-negating ideas. Rather, the uniformity of their stances point to the prevailing sentiments in the wider society, caused by widespread environmental catastrophes that visited ancient urban centers at the core centers.

D. The Gospel of Axial Religions: Cosmic Homelessness and Cosmic Optimism through Salvation/Liberation:

Negativity toward nature and society was a prevailing sentiment of archaic societies. What the axial prophets and philosophers did was to give vent to these popular sentiments through their religious and philosophical teachings. On the other hand, they also put forward a number of

⁴⁸ Ibid., Hick, 36.

novel religious and philosophical ideas and options for the future. They did so by offering alternative strategies – mythical or eschatological – to overcome the widespread moods of despondency and thereby sought to rekindle the aspirations of the masses toward a hopeful future. The fact that they came up with alternative strategies to overcome widespread hopelessness shows some resistance to the prevailing sentiments of alienation. Nevertheless, the strategies they advanced to overcome alienation were unrealistic, utopian pie-in-the-sky; they could offer no just eco-social solutions, nor any concrete strategies to overcome the alienation. In the process their teachings, instead of alleviating the social ills, also accentuated the penchants for world-negation and furthered the human alienation from Nature. For these reasons, it should not be thought that the axial prophets, philosophers and religious leaders were the sole creators of the alienation or the world-negating soteriologies; they were merely giving expressions to the prevailing sentiments. These leaders sincerely sought to find positive ways of coping and surviving amidst utter despondency and alienation. Nevertheless, they also participated in the alienation. It became a part of their teaching and spread through the movements they initiated.

One of the major myths advanced by axial prophets was the notion of “cosmic homelessness” – a sense of being lost in the cosmos. The human negativity toward nature and a sense of “cosmic homelessness” go hand in hand. These ideas evolved and crystallized as humans crossed successive thresholds and by the dawn of axial age these ideas were sealed completely. John F. Haught, writing about this says,

[I]s not one of the major themes of the religions that we should feel out of joint and even out of place in our immediate environment? Ever since the so-called axial period . . . some of the major traditions have had strong other-worldly

leanings and have promoted spiritual disciplines that have made us feel alien to the physical universe. At times these traditions have asked us to withdraw from the world since “we have here no lasting home.” Homelessness has been *idealized rather than suppressed* [Emphasis mine].⁴⁹

The question is: How do humans cross over from a physical world to an ethereal realm of lasting peace and pleasures? The strategy advanced by axial prophets is “soteriology,” the human quest for salvation and liberation, a cardinal tenet of all axial religions. The essential features of axial soteriology can be summed up as follows.

- The world of nature, human society and the human body sustained by the world of nature are in reality fundamentally nefarious, broken, and ridden with evil.
- The essential human experience of this earthly reality is one of pain, misery, unreality, triviality and perversity⁵⁰ rather than pleasure and contentment.
- The actualities of this worldly reality are beyond redemption.
- Humans need, therefore, to hope and look for the re-creation of a whole new world.
- If re-creation is impossible, humans must strive to flee this world and voyage to another state of existence, an ethereal world beyond contemporary existence.

Post-axial religions offer “cosmic optimism” as the lasting solution for all contemporary ills.

John Hick writes,

⁴⁹John F. Haught, “Religious and Cosmic Homelessness: Some Environmental Implications,” in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches in Ecological Theology*, eds. Charles Birch, William Eaken and Jay B. McDaniel, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 160.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 36.

It affirms the ultimate goodness from our human point of view, or to-be-rejoiced-in character, of the universe For post-axial religious optimism does not affirm the goodness of our earthly life in its present untransformed state. On the contrary, at this point the post-axial faiths have been typically negative and in that sense pessimistic. In a very general sense we can even say that archaic religion – even though with ample exceptions – was optimistic and world-affirming whilst the new insights of the axial age brought a wave of world-denial and a widespread sense of the hollowness, transitoriness and unsatisfactoriness of ordinary human existence. This immediate pessimism is however linked with an ultimate optimism. . . . And so the cosmic optimism of the post-axial religions is a vision of the ultimately benign character of the universe as it affects us human beings and an anticipation in faith that limitlessly good possibilities of existence will finally be realized.⁵¹

Christians have consistently come to believe that the earth is a fallen world and their ultimate calling is to abandon this world and journey toward a heavenly home. In reality it is the transference of the initial Garden of Eden archetypes to an ethereal existence – the coming of a new heaven and a new earth, a “Blessed Assurance,” a “Cosmic Optimism.” In fact the concluding chapters of the Book of Revelation (Chapters 21-22) paint a picture almost similar to the Garden of Eden saga (Genesis 2).

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal,
flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the great

⁵¹ Ibid, Hick, 56-57.

street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. [Revelations 22:1-3].

III. World-loyalty and the religion of Ecological Civilization

A. Primal Existence and World-loyalty:

It has to be reckoned that these beliefs in “cosmic homelessness” and “cosmic optimism” are of recent origin, rather a brief one considering the long-lasting histories of *Homo sapiens* on the planet Earth. These new notions have been in existence for a mere three to four thousand years while *Homo sapiens* have inhabited the planet for almost four hundred thousand years as hunters and gatherers. The dominant disposition of the primal people has been one of being at home. Primal myths and cults affirmed the providence of nature and integrated human presence and experiences with the process and events of nature.

If ever there was a phase in human evolution when some modicum of “world-loyalty” was extant, it was the primal times. It was when *Homo sapiens* lived as hunter-gatherers for almost 40,000 years – the longest-lasting of any structures of human existence till the advent of Holocene times. Those primal societies could do so with their implicit trust in the benevolence of the world processes. We may vicariously identify the “world-loyalty” of the primal times in contrast to the “world-rejection” of the axial times. Alfred North Whitehead said,

The moment of religious consciousness starts from self-valuation, but it broadens into the concept of the world as a realm of adjusted values, mutually intensifying or mutually destructive. . . In its solitariness the spirit asks, What, in the way of value, is the attainment of

life? And it can find no such value till it has merged its *individual claim with that of the objective universe. Religion is world-loyalty.* The spirit at once surrenders itself to this universal claim and appropriates it for itself.⁵² [Emphasis mine].

World-loyalty, according to Whitehead consists of a triad – Creativity-God-World,⁵³ a loyalty that is holistic, consistent, complex, organically relational, experiential and creative. It adds values to the cosmic adventures and advances human evolution and creativity to unimaginable heights.

From the onset of Holocene epoch, there has been a steady erosion of the values of world-loyalty. If religion is ultimately about world-loyalty, then any other loyalties – even commitments to any strains of monotheism – is falsehood or idolatry.⁵⁴ John Cobb sees the overcoming of “subordination...to limited and parochial goods” as the function of Axial Age religions, such that “where they lose influence lesser loyalties come back to the fore...not adequately countered by Enlightenment secularism.”⁵⁵ If we are to envision an “ecological civilization, we would need to articulate the implications of our theistic stances in terms of Whitehead’s proposition of “world-loyalty.” Unpacking Whitehead’s proposition will undoubtedly demand more study and exposition. [We do not have the luxury to do so here], but at least we can inaugurate a religious pilgrimage toward a new “world-loyalty” by envisioning the advent of an ecological civilization.

⁵² Ibid., Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 58-59.

⁵³ Ibid., Quiring, page 1.

⁵⁴ Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), Chapters 2 & 5.

⁵⁵ Quoted in, John Quiring’s guidelines to “Philosophy of Religion Track - 10th International Whitehead Conference” (Claremont, June4-7, 2015), 1.

B. New Visions for a New Age:

Conversations on envisioning an ecological civilization will undoubtedly call us to dabble with the gestalts of nature and cosmos once again, in whole different ways, free from the magical and mythical exercises of the past. Antinomies of savanna, desert and ancient urban gestalts and myths that advanced axial archetypes cannot serve our quest. At these levels of conversation, we are delving into cosmogony, cosmology, planetary sciences and related epistemologies for which we seek the aid of science and philosophy. Nevertheless, we reckon that science and philosophy are not adequate enough for the contemplation, comprehension and conceptualization of those extramural and intramural gestalts and dimensions. At that stage of rational lacunae our religious and spiritual ingenuity kicks into gear and sways us. We who live in the space age are one of the propitious people in terms of our acumen for comprehending anything and everything in depth and breadth scientifically, philosophically, psychically as well as religiously. For the first time in human history we are able to peek down at our planet on our desktop monitors via signals beamed from space telescopes. It is one thing to stare at the Blue Planet on our desktop monitors, it is yet another thing to gape down at the Planet from outer-space. “The whole Earth is aesthetically stimulating,” wrote Holmes Rolston, “philosophically challenging, and ethically disturbing.”⁵⁶ “I remember so vividly,” said astronaut Michael Collins, “what I saw when I looked back at my fragile home – a glistening, inviting beacon, delicate blue and white, a tiny outpost suspended in the black infinity, Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious

⁵⁶Holmes Rolston, III., *A New Environmental Ethics: The Next Millennium for Life on Earth* (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2012), 194.

that must endure.”⁵⁷ Indeed several astronauts who observed the planet Earth from outer space have expressed similar sentiments. Some of them even claim to have had some sort of religious conversion.⁵⁸ Indeed the sheer beauty of the planet which sparkles like a blue diamond set against the dark velvety space enchants all of us. Such a luxury was not conferred upon our ancestors. For them, especially our primal ancestors, the entry into that “*mysterium tremendum*”⁵⁹ came via the celestial panorama. Ancient desert nomads experienced similar religious ecstasies when they gazed into the night sky.⁶⁰ For postmodern humans who are at the threshold of a new space age, entry into such ecstasies occurs from viewing the “Rare Earth” and the cosmos through all means available to us.⁶¹ Whether we gaze into the starry heavens or view the earth through space telescopes, or peak into the subatomic world through Hadron Collider, one thing is certain – that we are beginning to live out our religious existence at several frontiers [and dimensions] rather than clinging merely to our own respective religious histories and traditions. Increasingly we are made aware that our destinies and that of this planet are contingent on forces that are outside the planet and beyond human control and those that are of our own making. Therefore our religious imaginations, existence, experiences and engagements in the world must come to rest on the knowledge we absorb from multi-varied disciplines of

⁵⁷ Michael Collins, “Foreword,” in Roy A. Gallant, *Our Universe* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1980), 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Veeraraj, ix.

⁵⁹ “*Mysterium Tremendum*” is the philosophical term that Rudolf Otto, a German theologian gave to a religious experience – meaning literally “tremendous mystery.” Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed. Trans. John W. Harve (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁶⁰ Psalm 8.

⁶¹ Peter D. Ward and Donald Brownlee, *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life is Uncommon in the Universe* (New York, NY: Copernicus, 2000).

science and arts – astrobiology, astronomy, and planetary-climatological and environmental histories.⁶² It is indeed a “world-loyalty” to which Whitehead called us to commit and submit.

C. Sizing an Ecological Civilization:

As modern humans, we have an ambivalent religious existence because our environmental niches, especially our urban and sub-urban settings are truncated. The modern urban, technological and industrial gestalts rarely harmonize with gestalts derived from the world of nature and cosmos, or with those of the rural and agrarian past. Increasingly we are forced to rely on gestalts derived from human history, urban sociology and mainstream economics. Until recently we were living through the Holocene epoch, which began at the conclusion of the last Ice Age, about 12,000 years ago, and which continues, at least officially, to this day. And then we were told that we now live in an “Age of Ecology” that is said to have begun in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring*.⁶³ With the publication of *Silent Spring*, a great deal of optimism and hope was generated and that we will live to see the flowering of the Age of Ecology. In 1974, the first Earth Day celebration was inaugurated to bring home the necessity to protect and preserve what is left of the environment. Of late, scholars and earth scientists have questioned this attribution to this epoch; it seems a misnomer. In 1989, Bill McKibben published a small book entitled, *The End of Nature*,⁶⁴ dousing all hopes of reverting

⁶² Ibid., Veeraraj, *Green History of Religion*, 3.

⁶³ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

⁶⁴ William McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).

the downhill race toward environmental catastrophe. Humans are now the most important geomorphic agent on the planet's surface.⁶⁵

We now stand at the crossroads of change – a change of epochs. “Until now,” wrote Holmes Rolston, “the technosphere was contained within the biosphere; henceforth the biosphere will be contained within the technosphere.”⁶⁶ The term “Anthropocene” is the new buzz word among the practitioners of environmental sciences. The term was invented by Paul Crutzen, a Dutch chemist, who shared the Nobel Prize for discovering the effects of ozone-depleting compounds.⁶⁷ The Age of Anthropocene has now come to be widely recognized replacing the Holocene epoch. According to Crutzen, the Anthropocene age began with the emergence of industrial age at the turn of the nineteenth century. Incidentally, the start of the Anthropocene epoch is marked as 1784 when the steam engine was invented. It was also known as the beginning of the Industrial age.⁶⁸ The Anthropocene will be marked by a unique “stratigraphic signature” that is still legible today. Among other things, the epoch will be marked by the human propensity for redistributing life all over the world and crossing the sustainable limits of the planet. The term “Anthropocene” is yet to be certified by The International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) of the Geological Society.⁶⁹ The ICS is the group responsible for maintaining the official timetable of earth's history. The commission will meet to vote on the name change

⁶⁵ Bruce H. Wilkinson and Brandon J. McElroy, “The Impact of Humans on Continental Erosion and Sedimentation,” *Geological Society of America Bulletin* 119 (2007), 140-156.

⁶⁶ Ibid., Rolston, *A New Environmental Ethics*, 44.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Un-natural History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2014).

⁶⁸ Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” in *NATURE*, Vol 415, 3 January 2002; www.nature.com

⁶⁹ To geologists, an epoch is a subdivision of a period, which, in turn, is a division of an era; the Holocene, for instance, is an epoch of the Quaternary, which is a period in the Cenozoic.

in 2016. Should the term Anthropocene be adopted as an epoch, “every geology textbook in the world” says Elizabeth Kolbert, “immediately will become obsolete.”⁷⁰

One of the worrying things about tackling the malaises of the Anthropocene Age is that most remedies and solutions will be offered and executed by scientists, engineers and technocrats. Much of the new technologies will be prompted by profit motives. We do not believe that scientific and technological fixes based on mainstream economic will solve environmental catastrophes. To a large extent, the contemporary environmental crisis is caused by unrestrained use of technology and science. Science and technology are amoral. Ultimately they sell their souls to commercial interests. Human consumption has caused irreparable damage and disruptions in the Earth’s climatic systems on a global scale unprecedented in human history. The anthropogenic devastations visited on the ecosystems demand a major assessment of our worldviews, our use of science and technology and call for an immediate transformation of our ways of living in the world.

The question is: Can science and technology fix our ills? We must be mindful of the inherent dangers in surrendering human destinies to the ideological gestalts of urban, scientific and technological economics at the expense of Nature and the marginalized people. Gestalts, paradigms and archetypes have power. Over a period of time, archetypes tend to leave the resultant paradigm intact, rigid and unyielding. The principal paradigm may live on even if the contexts of the gestalts have changed. At that juncture, the archetypal paradigm becomes menacing, vicious, and lethal. Contemporary gestalts and the skeletal paradigms of the past

⁷⁰ Ibid., Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*, 109-110.

often clash; when they clash, the votaries of the obsolete paradigms turn their rage on neighbors who live by alternate or progressive paradigms. The upsurge in religious violence we witness around the world is a case in point; the motifs and dynamics of these conflicts are derived from ancient historical and axial religious contexts. John Cobb lists scores of fall outs from axial paradigms that lead to potential catastrophes in the contemporary times – “nuclear, climate, agricultural, financial, and political – as the contemporary fruition of a history of increasing human ‘alienation from nature’ since the rise of agriculture generated and reinforced by ‘lesser loyalties’ ...and the extreme individualism and anthropocentrism of mainstream economics.”⁷¹ The only way to avert these catastrophes is to be open to gestalts that would advance an ecological civilization.

Where is religion in all these conversations? Our faith traditions and their cultural and ideological products dominated by anthropocentric motives have collectively brought this quandary upon contemporary human societies. We need transformed religious traditions to be at the center of the conversations and projects. In times like these, a move toward a new paradigm, scaffold by cosmic, planetary and bioregional gestalts would go a long way in solving local and international conflicts. The need of the hour is for humanity as a whole to be open to the fresh visitations of new cosmic, planetary, ecological gestalts. These gestalts will enchant the world of nature anew and aid humanity to envision and nurture the emergence of a new paradigm – a new world-loyalty -- an ecological civilization that would warrant a lasting hopeful peaceful future for all humanity and the Planet. It will revolutionize our understanding of the phenomenon of religion altogether, not to mention the study of the history of religion itself. We will also find

⁷¹ Ibid., Quiring, 1.

ways to cleanse all World Religions of their world-negating motifs formed during their seminal days. If the underlying paradigms of our faiths and practices change for the better, they would transform our hearts and minds triggering seismic shifts of our social, political and religious institutions, moving us toward anticipating and embracing an Ecological Civilization. Religion is a big part of the solution and hope.

Holocene Climate Change and Corresponding Historical Events

Holocene-Flandrian Epoch (Quaternary period)

15,000 - 11,000 BCE – Post-Glacial Period – Cryocratic Phase

Waning of ice-sheets and temperatures and precipitation increase

11,000 - 10,000 BCE – Younger Dryas (Tundra Stage)

A brief return to glacial and arid conditions

10,000 – 6000 BCE -- Early Holocene (Protocratic Phase)

Resurgence of warm and wet weather in Northern Hemisphere

6000 – 1000 BCE -- Mid-Holocene (Early Mesocratic Phase)

Climatic conditions become similar to the present day.

Rapid desertification in North Africa, Middle East and Northwest India⁷²

1000 BCE – to the present – Late Holocene

Pre-axial, Axial and Post-Axial History (Holocene Age)

12,000 BCE -- Wadi Activities & Dogs tames for hunting purposes

10,600 BCE – Emergence of Neolithic villages in the Middle East

8,000 BCE -- Irrigation for horticulture in the Middle East

Jericho as cluster of villages along River Jordan

3,500 BCE -- Sumerian civilization; Invention of the wheel and cuneiform writing

⁷² Martin Claussen et al., "Simulation of an Abrupt Change in Saharan Vegetation in the Mid-Holocene," *Geophysical Research Letters* 26, 14, (1999): 2037-40. "Saharan desertification, the largest change in land cover during the last 6000 years, was a natural phenomenon as it can be described in terms of climate-system dynamics only. Although humans lived in the Sahara and used the land to some extent, we hypothesize that ancient land use played only a negligibly small role in mid-Holocene Saharan desertification."

3,300 BCE -- Chronic warfare

3,000 BCE -- Civilization of the Nile in Egypt

2,800 BCE -- Indus Valley civilization on the Indus River

1,700 BCE -- Aryan-Vedic peoples with Sanskrit language enter India

1,200 BCE -- Exodus of Israel from Egypt; Rise of monotheism

1,193 BCE -- Trojan War, Mycenaean Civilization

800 BCE -- Prophets of Israel

628 BCE -- Zoroaster

587 BCE -- Babylonian Exile

570 BCE -- Mahavira

560 BCE -- Buddha

536 BCE -- Return of the Jewish Captives from Babylon

450 BCE -- Socrates, Plato, Aristotle

327 BCE -- Alexander invades Indus Valley

260 BCE -- Asoka

4 BCE -- Jesus

570 CE -- Mohammed

1095 CE -- Crusades

1600 CE -- Age of Enlightenment

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