

God, Gaia and Us

Moving Towards a New Form of Mysticism
Emeritus Professor Lloyd Geering

Everything in the universe is connected. The Latin word from which we derive ‘universe’ simply means ‘turned into one’ and what turns ‘all that is’ into a **universe** is connectedness. Of course what the ancient Romans understood as the universe has turned out to be only a small part of what we understand as the universe. But even though we now believe the universe to contain galaxies far distant in space from our own galaxy, they are still connected and can all be traced back to a common origin that we currently call the ‘Big Bang’.

The phenomenon of connectedness, however, is particularly applicable to our planetary home, that we call Earth. All life on this planet has its own form of connectedness. And we humans are part of it. We are just as much creatures of the earth as are the wild animals and the insects. We have our roots in the earth, metaphorically, just as much as plants and trees. We humans are made of the dust of the earth and to dust we return, as the Bible has long affirmed.

Yet in the short interval that constitutes the life of each human we are able to hold in our minds a mental picture of the whole universe. One of my favourite biblical authors observed this over two thousand years ago, when he wrote:

Even the world itself God has put into the human mind,
but in such a way that people cannot discover,
from beginning to end, what it is that he has done.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (c. 300BCE)

We need to pause for a moment to realise what an extraordinary fact it is - that in our minds we are able to create a picture of the universe. It means that, through us tiny earthly creatures, the universe attempts to look at itself. Unfortunately this fact has often had the effect of causing us to think we are beings **outside of** the universe — beings **apart from** of it. Then we cease to be aware of the connectedness of ‘all that is’.

A further unfortunate aspect of this wonderful fact is that we too readily assume that the picture of the universe we hold in our minds corresponds exactly to the way things are. We fail to acknowledge that it is a picture that we have constructed. Moreover, in the long and complex history of human cultures there have been many, and often quite diverse, mental pictures of the universe constructed by humans. Of course, the modern enterprise of empirical science makes us confident that our modern picture of the universe is considerably closer to the real thing than the many cultural pictures that preceded it.

I am going to suggest, however, that in some rather curious ways the ancients may have had a healthier understanding of the universe than we do today, in spite of the highly sophisticated and technological culture of the west.

Fifty years ago, 1958, I read a book entitled *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*. It was written by five experts (Henri Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, William A. Irwin), on the ancient Middle East, the cradle of Western civilisation. It made some interesting points about how the ancients pictured the universe in which they found themselves living and how they interpreted all the forces of nature that they observed and encountered. Here are some of them:

Life permeates all that is, and this means that there is nothing that is lifeless.

(There is no It: the whole universe is alive.)

Humans relate to the world (Nature) in the I-Thou mode, not I-It.

(We must relate to Nature as personal, in the same way as we relate to one another as persons. We must listen to what Nature tells us and responding to what Nature requires of us).

Natural phenomena are willed by personal forces (gods and spirits).

We would say, today that the ancients were, without knowing it, projecting their own consciousness into what they observed in their world. This is how they came to create the widespread notion of spirits and gods. These supposed unseen spiritual beings were thought to inhabit all objects and phenomena in the known world. The sun rose, the rivers flowed, the storms descended because these phenomena were alive and personal.

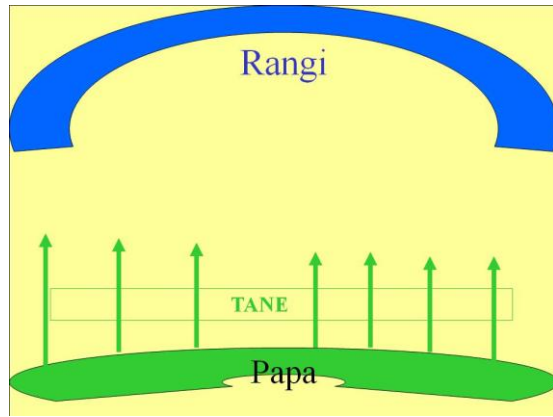
We can understand how natural it was to arrive at such an interpretation because, even today, we may find a two-year-old, when accidentally hitting its head on the table corner as it passes by, turning round to address the object causing pain by saying, 'You naughty table!'

So, after concluding that natural objects were inhabited by spirits and gods, it was a simple step to think of them, not so much as inhabiting the rivers, mountains and storms, but rather as controlling them. To explain what we call natural phenomena, the ancients did not ask 'How did this event happen?' but 'Who caused it and why?' As recently as this century many intelligent people quickly jumped to the conclusion that the Indian Ocean Tsunami had been willed by God.

In most ancient cultures it was believed that all natural phenomena reflected the will of the gods. In many of them there was a Sky-Father and an Earth Mother, who were the progenitors of all the other gods, each with his or her own portfolio or special area of operation.

Let us take the example of pre-European Maori culture. Rangi is the Sky Father and Papa the Earth Mother. It was the embrace of these two that generated all the other gods, it was Tane, the god of the forests and birds, who was finally

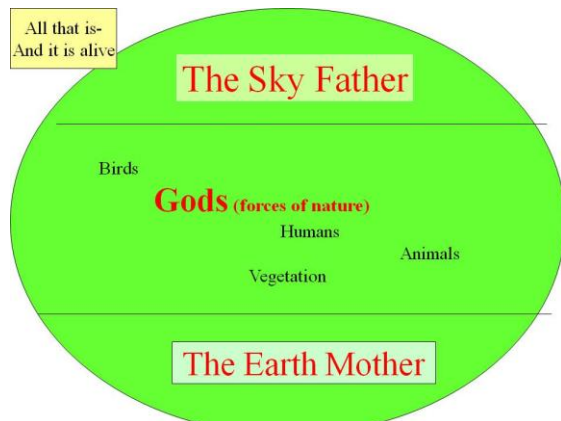
successful in separating Rangī from Papa by pushing up Rangī by means of the tall trunks of his trees. This further explained why the rain falls from above and the mists rise from the ground; they manifested the weeping of Rangī and Papa because they had been separated from each other.



In ancient Greece the name of the Earth Mother was Gaia. The word was often used poetically for GE, the Greek word for earth, has been preserved in our word ‘geology’, ‘the study of the earth. The male consort of Gaia was Zeus, the chief of the gods. The equivalent in ancient Roman culture were Jupiter (the word even retains the word pater or ‘father’) and his wife Juno.

What we should note generally about both the ancient world-view and the continuing tribal world-view is:

All that is forms a unity and is one complex bundle of life.



Humans felt themselves to be within a vast and complex whole that was permeated by life through and through. They saw themselves as all part of a great variety of living forms, both visible and invisible, on which their own life depended. The gods, though invisible, were so immanent that ancient people felt they virtually lived among them.

How did we humans lose that sense of oneness? In the first millennium before the Christian era a radical cultural transition took place in Europe and Asia. The transition did not reach the remote tribal areas of Africa, the Americas and Australasia until much later. Karl Jaspers labelled this transition the Axial Period and centred it on 500 BC. The transition was probably longer and more complex than Jaspers thought, but it was still a radical cultural change. Karen Armstrong has called it *The Great Transformation* in her book of that title (Atlantic Books, 2006). Complex though this transformation was, and varying considerably in details from culture to culture, there are certain broad features we can isolate if we compare the cultural situation before the Axial Period with that which obtained after it. What I here present here is admittedly very simplistic but it will hopefully help us to understand some basic changes of which we are the heirs.

The Great Transformation brought some radical changes. As a result of these we see and interpret reality (all that is) very differently from the way both the ancients and tribal cultures did. The echo of these changes can still be heard to this day in the different ways that Pakeha and Maori relate to the natural world. The Maori still feel a spiritual bond with the earth that the pakeha do not. This difference can be traced back to the Great Transformation. It was then that there emerged for the first time in human consciousness the awareness of the purely physical or what we may call the It-world, to use Martin Buber's term.

1. The emergence of the It-world.

Whereas everything was once thought to be permeated by a life-force, a concept still preserved in certain Maori terms, it came to be recognised during the Great Transformation that not everything in the world is alive or has ever been alive. Not only are rocks and mountains **not** alive but **neither** are volcanoes, rivers, clouds and storms, however much movement and vitality they appear to show. The emergence of the It-world was a great breakthrough in human perception. In the long run it was destined to lead to the emergence of the physical sciences, especially physics, chemistry. The change is clearly illustrated in the way in which astrology was replaced by astronomy. In astrology the planets were believed to be personal beings who determined human destiny; in astronomy they were objects whose movements could be measured and predicted.

Today we so take for granted the difference between lifeless forms and living forms that we overlook the fact that our pre-Axial forbears did not recognise this divide. This basic difference between living and non-living plays a basic role in the game of 20 questions, when one of the first questions asked is 'Is it animal, vegetable or mineral?' the three different categories into which we commonly divide all physical objects.

The differentiation between lifeless and living forms was destined to lead to the reduction of the number of the gods, and much later to the elimination of all gods. We turn first to the reduction of the gods.

2. The transition from polytheism to monotheism.

Over a period of several hundred years the belief in many gods was replaced by the belief in only one God. Oneness became an important attribute of the divine or spirit world. 'The Lord our God is One' says the Jewish Shema. 'Wahid' or 'one' became one of the 99 beautiful names of Allah in Islam.

Why did this transition take place? The traditional answer is that the one true God spoke through his chosen prophets, such as Moses and Muhammad, and dispelled the gods as unreal. But I suspect that human psychology had much to do with it. There is a correlation between the way we perceive our external world and the way we organise our internal world. Carl Jung referred to our mental growth to mature personhood as the process of individuation. It is a process by which each of

us, by stages, becomes an integrated whole – a unified self. Now what happens quite naturally **within** our psyche, we unconsciously project on to the **external** world, as we construct a picture of it. We experience a strong urge to establish order or unity out of the chaos of messages that our sense organs convey to the brain. It leads us to construct a **universe**, a turning of all that is into one.

The accumulation of the gods, that had been created in each ancient culture to explain natural phenomena, had now become such a confusing jumble that the innate search for unity in the human psyche longed for some way of unifying it. We have a modern example in the way Isaac Newton's concept of gravity brought one simple explanation to three quite different phenomena - the falling of objects to the ground, the movement of the tides and the path of the moon.

The Greeks manifested this desire for unity in their use of the term 'logos'. The word means 'human reason' and refers to the way our minds attempt to reconcile contradictions and resolve ambiguities. Our word 'logical' comes from it. But 'logos' was also the word the Greeks used to explain the underlying unity of the universe. We have that reflected in the wonderful prologue of St. John's Gospel. 'In the beginning was the logos and the logos was with God and the logos was God'.

While we may speculate, with a variety of theories, as to why the transition from polytheism to monotheism took place, the fact remains that it did. The Bible was mostly written during and after that transition and thus it documents the process very clearly. There we find a battle being waged between the prophets who pioneered the emergence of monotheism, and the defenders of polytheism who tried desperately to preserve the Canaanite worship of the forces of nature.

3. The supremacy of the Sky God.

As polytheism slowly evolved into monotheism, many of the features of the former Sky God were retained and transferred to the (now) one and only deity. These included:

- His heavenly dwelling place (Our Father who art in heaven).
- His maleness (monotheistic traditions became patriarchal.)
- His almighty power as the storm god (now interpreted as divine anger).
- The disappearance of the Earth Mother. (All things feminine became degraded).
-

4. Immanence of the divine gave way to transcendence.

Humans were no longer living among the gods but in an earthly world far below the heavenly world in which God lived. The physical tangible world eventually became degraded, as we shall now see with ...

5. The Emergence of the dualistic universe.

The overall unity of 'all that is' became strained, with the result that the one-world universe of the ancients became a two-world universe. After the Great

Transformation the whole of reality was believed to consist of an unseen upper world (eternal and spiritual) and this seen lower world (materialistic, time-bound, and lacking spirituality). The seen world became a 'fallen world', wholly at the mercy of the spiritual world and destined for final destruction.

Let us attempt to express this change visually.

First, in the world before the great transformation, we note the gender balance among the gods. We note their immanence; they live in the same world.

Now when we look at the world after the great transformation, we observe great changes.

The changes.

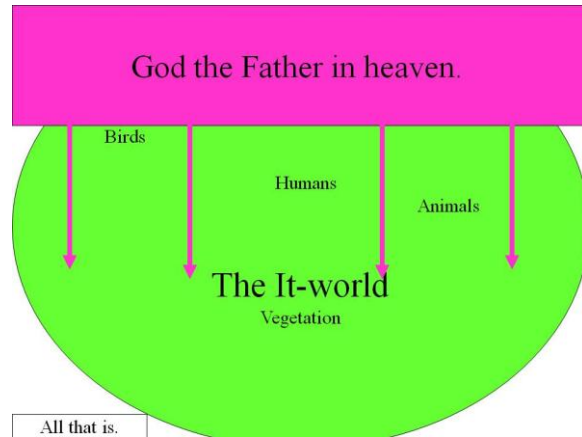
- The earth becomes an It-world (materialistic, non-living)
- The disappearance of the gods.
- Natural phenomena are under the control of one God.

'I form light and I create darkness.

I bring health and I create disease.

I, the LORD do all these things'. (Isaiah 45:7)

- Unusual natural events are 'acts of God' (miracles).
- The transformation of the sky into a new spiritual world.
- The transcendence of this eternal, spiritual world.



As this mentally constructed picture of all that is became increasingly dualistic, the eternal world began to expand and become more complex until, by the high middle ages, it completely dominated Christian consciousness. By the world of 1400 AD, it looked something like this.



We should note:

- The earth has changed colour because it has become a fallen world, doomed to destruction, and to be replaced at the end of time by a new heaven and a new earth.
- Heaven or 'city of God' is becoming increasingly populated.
- Fear of eternal fires of hell-fire has become a dominant concern.

The eternal world was a mental picture created in Christian imagination by Christian devotion.



Here is a painting of this dualistic world from the Renaissance period.

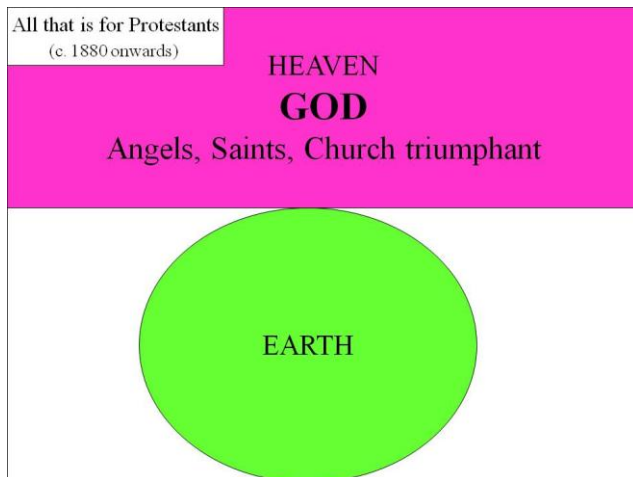


But what has been humanly constructed in devout imagination can also fade away like a dream. The first change came at the Protestant Reformation.

Here is the Protestant world of 1500AD. Purgatory has disappeared.

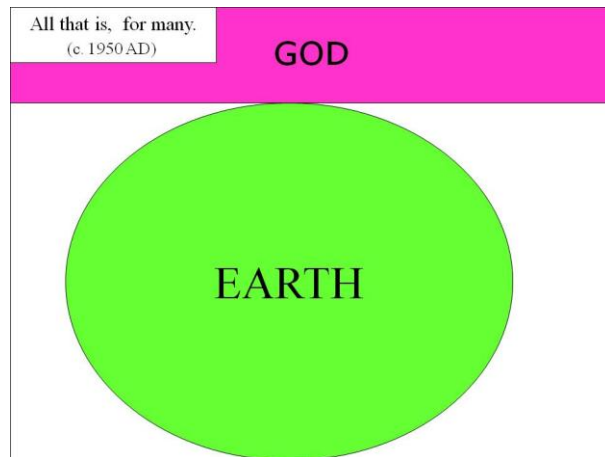
Then, from the late 19th century, the torments of Hell could no longer be reconciled with an all-loving God. Its reality was questioned and, after much vigorous debate, began to disappear from Christian consciousness.

So here is what the world was becoming as it entered the 20th century.



Though Hell is disappearing, God and heaven remain. The earth changes colour for it is now being seen more positively and it is looming larger in human consciousness. From no later than the 18th century artists began to see beauty in the landscape and think it worth painting. In the romantic period of the early 19th century that

natural landscape inspired the poets. Thus century also sees the rise of secularism; the importance of this physical world is becoming more important.



By the middle of the 20th century heaven (or any after-life) was beginning to disappear from western consciousness and God retained an uncertain existence. In the 60's, theologians made the dramatic announcement that 'God is dead!' The reality of God may be compared with the grin on the disappearing Cheshire cat in Alice and Wonderland.

So by the beginning of the 21st century, this is the picture of the real world we are becoming adjusted to.

But is this all that is? Not by a very long way. During the last four hundred years, as the dualistic world imagined by Christian consciousness was slowly dissolving, another and much vaster picture of the universe has been replacing it from the time of Galileo onwards. We entered the 20th century with astronomers talking about an expanding universe. It is quite literally expanding even though it is now so enormous that our minds can no longer contain it, in the way our forbears, including even Ecclesiastes, thought they could. Here is an attempt to visualise it, but it cannot be anything at all close to scale.

Our world is a tiny planet in our solar system.

Our solar system revolves around a very average-sized star, one of ten billions in our galaxy or star-cluster that we call the milky way. It in turn is one of ten billion galaxies. The light takes less than **only eight minutes** to travel from the sun to us. It takes **four a half years** to arrive from the next nearest star. It takes **500,000 years** to cross from one side of the galaxy to the other. The other galaxies are **millions of light years** away from us. We now have massive telescopes through which we can photograph them.

Yet, these distances in both space and time are so great – astronomical they say – that the universe beyond our solar system does not affect our daily life except as a matter of interest and curiosity. Planet earth means everything to us humans but in the universe itself it is but an insignificant speck of dust.

For all practical purposes, it is planet earth that constitutes our world. (When we speak of the world, it is often not clear whether we mean the universe or our planet earth). Not only has the unseen eternal world of heaven and hell vanished into unreality but the space-time continuum that replaced it does not impinge on human existence in the way the former did.

The traditional heavenly dwelling place of God has been completely lost in the new picture of the universe. What has happened to God - the One who replaced the gods at the Great Transformation?

To explain this I borrow an idea from the philosopher Karl Popper. He suggested that to understand 'all that is' in a way

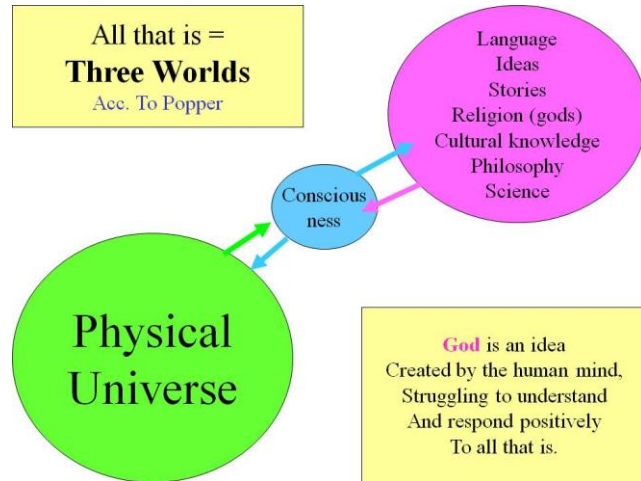
that does justice to human existence and to human knowledge, we should think of three worlds. They are very different from one another. The first is the physical world, which now consists of the vast space-time universe. Through most of age of the universe (as we now conceive it) there was nothing else but this physical world.

But in the course of time, about three billion years ago, our planet Earth brought forth life. Then after a very long time, no more than two hundred thousand years ago, it brought forth the human species. Through the collective creativity of the human species it began to bring forth a non-physical, non-spatial reality – the world of consciousness. This lives within the physical brains of the human species but is not itself an independent entity, as Plato conceived the immortal soul to be. Consciousness is awareness of the physical world through the medium of the sense experiences. In the course of time conscious human reflection on these experiences, in collective conjunction with one another, created a third world. This also is non-physical and non-spatial.

It contains language, the names of things, ideas, stories, religious beliefs and rituals, arts. In each human community this became a body of cultural knowledge handed down from generation to generation and continually growing. The idea of God belongs to this world, It is now seen to be a humanly created idea; it has evolved and changed within the complex body of cultural knowledge. In some cultures it has played a very central role, while in others it has not. Eventually this third world gave rise to philosophy and science; and these in turn have questioned the usefulness of the God idea.

But this third world, as it develops and changes, also changes human consciousness and this in turn affects the way in which humans understand and use the physical planet on which they live and of which they are a part.

World 3 is powerful though invisible. We depend on it for our humanity for each of us has been shaped by one or other of the leading cultural traditions that make up World 3. In recent times, through the accumulation of scientific knowledge it is expanding at an exponential rate, far outstripping the capacity of one human mind to contain anything but a tiny fragment of the whole. More than ever before we humans



have become dependent upon one another, not only for the basic necessities of life but for the knowledge by which to live a satisfying life.

Further, World 3 is developing something like a life of its own as, through the mass media and the internet, it is being made available to all and is quickly spread around the world. In some respects World 3 may be said to have taken over the directive role once attributed to God. It speaks to us and challenges us with a kind of prophetic voice.

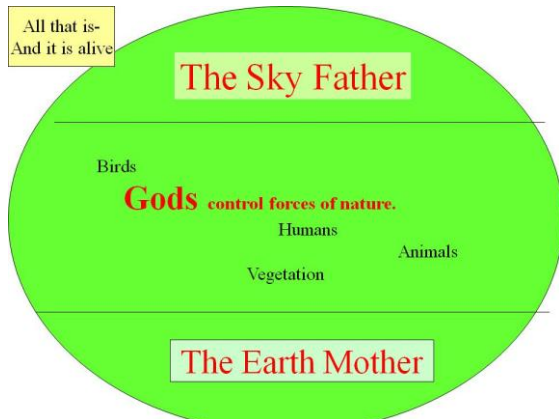
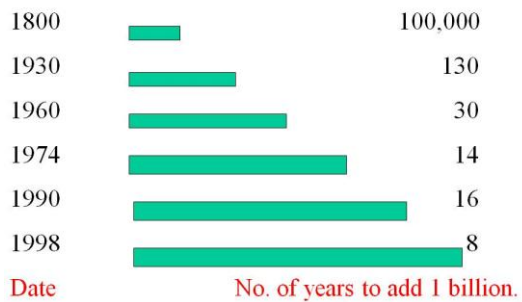
At the present time the body of cultural knowledge (in World 3) is increasingly alerting our collective human consciousness (in World 2) that human activity in World 1 is having very serious effects on the ability of world 1 to sustain life in the way it did so in the past. In particular we are being warned that the earth cannot continue to support human life in the manner in which the affluent section of humanity has become accustomed.

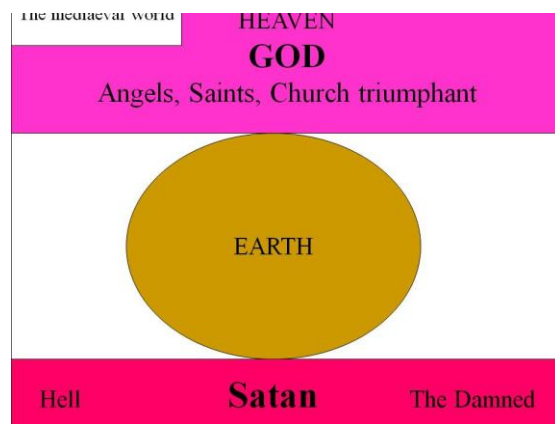
Through most of human history, say the last 200,000 years, the human species had no real affect on the forces of nature. But the recent explosion of human population, has changed this. Human population quadrupled in 20th century. This coupled with our much more powerful technology, has led to very serious consequences:

More food required, Destruction of forests, More pollution, Increase of carbon dioxide, Global warming, Changing weather patterns, Rise in sea level, Fierce competition for oil. World 3 is now telling us that we are responsible for all life on this planet. And just at this very point in time we are making a discovery that may well help us, at a time when the traditional source of superhuman help has disappeared. Let me illustrate it this way.

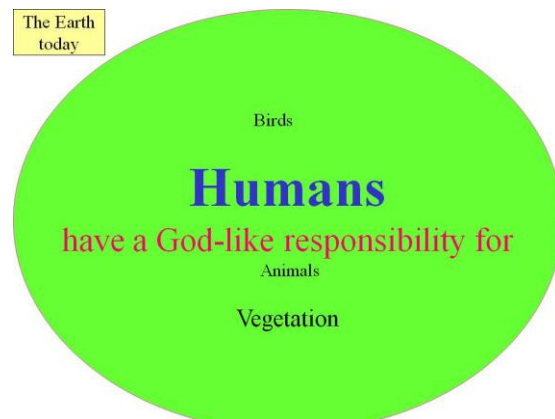
Up until only two to three thousand years ago the world humans lived in seemed something like this.

Population Explosion





For the next two thousand years it looked something like this.



But in the light of the current knowledge in our world the earth is looking something like this.

As we see it the Earth consists of a lifeless giant body surrounded by a thin layer of life, in air, land and water.

What we now find we have in common with the ancients.

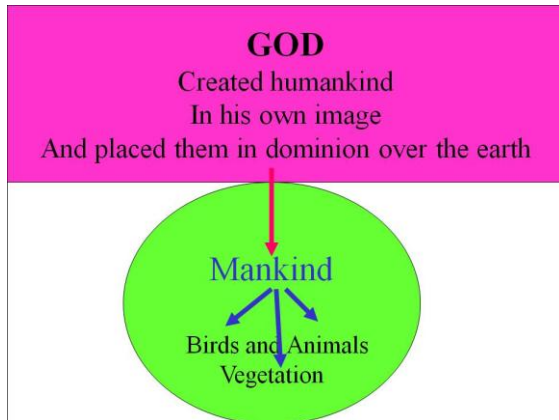
- Earth has re-asserted its supremacy over humans.
- Earth is the mother of all life.
- Earth sustains all life.
- Earth can once again be called Gaia.

What is known as Gaia theory came to birth in the mind of an extraordinarily creative scientist – James Lovelock. At first he called it the Biocybernetic Universal System Tendency/Homeostasis. But it was pointed out to him by his friend and fellow villager, William Golding, author of *The Lord of the Flies*, ‘You need a more interesting name than that for something that seems so alive. I suggest you call it Gaia’. So Gaia it became. In 1979 Lovelock wrote *Gaia: A New Look at Life on earth*.

The **Gaia theory** proposes that the biosphere is connected with the other physical components of the Earth – the atmosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere – in such a way as to form a complex interacting system. This system acts in a homeostatic fashion that preserves climatic and biochemical conditions on Earth to make it suitable for living systems.

Gaia theory does not say the earth **is** a living organism but rather that life in all of its diversity has so evolved in relation to the physical forces of its earthly environment that it operates rather **like** an organism, worthy of the name **Gaia**. The living envelope of the earth, along with its environmental home, constitutes a self-regulating system similar to the immunity systems in the human body. As the human

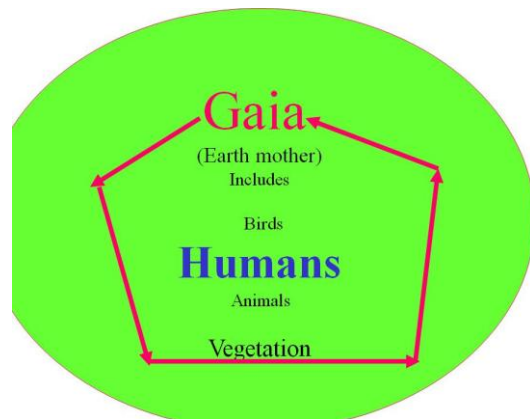
body has a remarkable capacity to restore itself to health or wholeness, so the natural forces of the earth have a remarkable capacity to preserve and restore the climatic and biogeochemical conditions on Earth that make it suitable for living systems.



We humans, particularly in the Western world, had come to assume the earth was an impersonal It. After the Great Transformation our cultural tradition led us to believe that we humans were a unique god-like species, who had been given over the earth and all of its other living forms. We believed that we could exploit the earth and its creatures for our own material

advantage. World 3, which we ourselves have created, is now telling us we are suffering from hubris. We have overstepped ourselves. We have not paid sufficient attention to the natural forces of the earth. For our current well-being and the future of all species, including our own, we ignore these forces at our peril.

Since the earth does not exist for us humans alone then, if we interfere too much with the homeostatic nature of Gaia we become like a cancerous growth within Gaia. In order to restore the balances we have been upsetting in Gaia, the natural forces that constitute Gaia may work together to eliminate our species in the same way as immune systems fight against cancer cells to destroy them. Our immune system does not think and plan, as we humans think and plan, yet the effect is the same as if it did. So it is with Gaia.



Whether we choose to use the Gaia model or not, the fact remains that human activity on this planet has not only speeded up the extinction of many species but is now endangering the future of our own species. The salvation of the earth and the salvation of our species have become one and the same goal. Since the concept of God may now be seen as a **symbol**, a symbol for the duties and virtues we feel bound to respond to, and since our supreme duty now is to care for the earth, then our traditional responsibility to God and our newly-found responsibility to the earth have become virtually the same. The earth, now perhaps better understood as Gaia, is not quite as lifeless or non-responsive to our activity as we once thought.

What is more we find that we humans, as creatures of the earth, are all part of Gaia. We are the most conscious facet of Gaia, and being conscious we now bear responsibility. As our species rediscovers its connectedness with the earth, it experiences on the grand scale what individuals have to find out during their own

short existence on the small scale – though they do not always do so. We begin life in our mother's womb, physically at one with her. After our birth we are still physically dependent on the nurture we receive in the bosom of our family. But in adolescence, we are programmed to rebel against parental authority, to distance ourselves from the security of family in order to become an independent self. In maturity, however, we learn to revalue our family and its connectedness, and to acknowledge in gratitude our mystical origin. In some respects, the human species, having passed through its adolescence and early adulthood, is now challenged to achieve the status of mature responsible personhood.

Only as recently as the 18th century did we begin to acknowledge our common humanity, with its emphasis on human rights and its subsequent condemnation of racism. We began to move out of long inherited tribalism. We still have far to go and much to learn. Yet even before we have reached the goal of a common humanity, we are challenged to acknowledge our oneness with all life, our connectedness with the planet.

This fresh awareness of our connectedness is giving rise to a new manifestation of mysticism. The mystic is the one who seeks by self-surrender to be united, even absorbed within, the ultimate reality. Mysticism is a religious phenomenon that has surfaced in all the great religious traditions. Since theistic traditions thought of God as the ultimate reality the mystic sought complete union with God. The Christian and Muslim traditions so magnified the transcendence of God that they frowned upon the aspirations of the mystics and often persecuted them. Mysticism flourished more in the Indian traditions where deity was conceived more vaguely as the undefined spirit with which the human spirit has a natural affinity. But most traditional forms of mysticism tended to assume the dualism of spiritual and material, and that had the effect of undervaluing the material.

In the modern form of human consciousness that traditional dualism has been superseded by a new understanding of the unity of all reality, thus opening up the way for a new kind of mysticism, that I may illustrate this way. The mediaeval Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, said, 'The eye with which I see God and the eye with which God sees me are one and the same eye'. As we are learning to see ourselves as all part of this living planet for whose future we have now become responsible we can turn Meister Eckhart's dictum into something like this – **'The eye with which I see Gaia earth is the eye with which Gaia earth sees itself'**.

As the aspiration of the mystic is to become one with ultimate reality, so the goal of the human race today should be one of abandoning all activities that have caused us to be in a state of war with the planet and to foster and magnify all those activities that lead us to a state of harmony with the planet. In some respects we have to recover the awe for Gaia earth that our ancient forebears had before the Great Transformation. Our planet home is coming to be seen again as Gaia, the Earth Mother that has brought us forth, nurtured us, whom now we must honour and care for.

This new form of mysticism is making its appearance wherever there is a conscious concern for the care of the planet, leading increasingly to such enterprises as conservation, environmentalism, sustainability, protection of species.

So whether we choose to use the more traditional God language (as did the traditional mystics), or opt for the new Gaia language (as do some New Age mystics), or simply use the everyday human language of ecology, we must now acknowledge, as did the ancients, that:

- We came from the earth.
- We remain creatures of the earth.
- The hope of our species for a viable future,
- Depends on our mystical re-union with the earth.

To celebrate this we may join in the Gaia song:

Gaia is the one who gives birth
She's the air, she's the sea, she's Mother Earth
She's the creatures that crawl and swim and fly.
She's the growing grass, she's you and I.