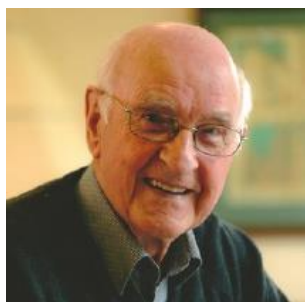


# The Evolution of Human Community from Family to Global Community

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We live in a post-theistic age in which we humans find that we now responsible for our own destiny, and even bear some responsibility for the future of life on this planet. No one individual is adequate for this task and we can meet our responsibilities only by working together as a global community. We are still some way from becoming one but we are much closer than we ever were in the past, as I shall now try to show.

I begin by pointing to a basic feature of the evolving cosmos in which we live, one that was first observed and brought to our attention by two creative thinkers. But being very different persons, they coined different terms to describe it.

The first was from Jan Smuts (1870-1950), the prime minister of South Africa in the early 20th century. Smuts was a remarkable man - a military leader, a statesman of international calibre and a philosopher. He participated in the peace treaties at the end of each of the two World Wars and assisted in setting up, first the League of Nations and, second the United Nations Organization. We shall return to these near the end of this lecture.

Smuts had a great respect for empirical science and was much admired by Einstein. In 1926 he wrote a book titled *Holism and Evolution*, in which he set out to show that all change taking place in this evolving universe reveal a proneness of the cosmos to form increasingly complex wholes. He called this proneness holism. His approach was in contrast with the interests of many scientists of that time, which was to concentrate on the analysis of complex substances into their component parts, as illustrated by the then goal of seeking how to split the atom.

The second man was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), Catholic priest and scientist. His thought revealed some distinct parallels with that of Jan Smuts, both men being fascinated by the process of evolution. His magnum opus, *The Phenomenon of Man*, he had completed by 1940 but it was not published until 1959. Teilhard referred to evolution as 'cosmogogenesis' - the coming into being of the cosmos. And what Jan Smuts called "the proneness of the cosmos to form increasingly complex wholes", Teilhard simply labelled 'complexification' - the tendency of the universe to form more complex entities. Complexification, or Holism, manifests itself in the following ways:

1. The basic stuff of this ever-evolving cosmos. The sub-atomic particles - - are so unstable that they quickly combine to form atoms. Atoms in turn show a tendency to unite together to form molecules, eg.  $(H_2+O=H_2O)$ , then molecules unite into mega-molecules and, eventually, mega-molecules turn into a living cell. The simplest living cell is remarkably complex. Furthermore, it continues to be alive only so long as it remains a whole. If we dissect it into its component parts it ceases to be alive. Life depends on its being a complex whole.



Only in the last five hundred million years did cells unite together in such large numbers as to produce the more complex wholes we now know as animal organisms. Smuts said this all took place because of a basic tendency permeating the cosmos -- the proneness to form wholes. Teilhard said it demonstrated complexification. The most complex animal we know of is the human being. The human body is a living whole - a **community** - made up of 100,000,000,000,000 cells, all of which work together in harmony for the health of the whole person.

2. Holism further explains the naturalness of health. It is enlightening to recall the etymology of the word 'Health' for it is a doublet of 'Wholeness'. When we greet one another by asking after our health we are actually enquiring about our wholeness. This is still shown very clearly in the standard Hebrew greeting - Shalom. ("Mashlom Kha?" literally means 'how is your wholeness?') Furthermore, when we suffer illness or break a bone we become restored to health or our bones knit because of holism. Health or wholeness is a product of nature and it is not our duty to create it but rather to nurture within us this already existing proneness to make us healthy or whole.
3. Evolution of human community. Just as in the long process of biological evolution cells unite together in a community to form the more complex entity of an animal organism - so organisms in turn congregate in communities to form larger and more complex wholes. Perhaps the clearest biological examples are to be found in the insect world, such as the ant nest and the hive of bees. In both of these instances the community is essential for the life of the individual ant or bee. Individual bees and ants cannot survive on their own but are dependent on their community. And so it is with us.

The evolution of community arises initially out of the natural need to regenerate the species. Only cells multiply by division. By contrast, multi-cellular beings, divided as they are into male and female genders, regenerate the species by sexual union. This leads them to be gregarious, living in groups or communities. Of course, these vary considerably in character and size from species to species. We humans share this gregarious nature with many other species, but having said that, from here onwards I confine myself to the way human community evolved.

The human community started with the family. Until recent times it was usually three-generational and included uncles and aunts, and thus more extended than the nuclear family of today. An essential feature of the family is that all of its members are genetically related. The genetic relationship initiates a social bond, demonstrated most strongly between mother and infant, and manifested in the family relationships by mutual caring, particularly when protection from external dangers is called for. As we so often say to this day in explanation of a particular action we take, "We are family!"

After the family the next stage in the evolution of human community is the tribe. This is a community of families and hence a more complex entity. The tribe evolved naturally because more than one family is needed for the regeneration of the species. It is hard to say just when and how incest came to be a phenomenon to be avoided at all costs, but it became strictly forbidden in all known societies. But whereas one family is dependent on another family for regeneration of the species, the tribe is complete in itself and does not need to integrate with any other tribe. Indeed, so strong did tribal ties become that intermarriage between tribes was relatively rare and was sometimes even forbidden.

Thus the tribe became the standard form of human community from earliest human times, say 200,000 years ago down to the present. It still survives in its archetypal form in New Guinea and inland South America. It remains operative among Maori to some degree to this day.. Further, something like a basic tribal instinct remains in all of us and comes to expression, for example, in our loyalty to a sports team or our pride in our city or nation.

There is an optimum number of individual persons for a tribe to live a communal life. So when a tribe became too numerous it divided - rather like a cell - into sub-tribes, which moved away from one another to live their own independent lives. This is the way in which the human community evolved into a further stage, that of an ethnic group or race of people. Each race of people is distinctive by drawing from the same gene pool, one that determines, for example, their skin colour - white, yellow, brown and black. Racial divisions remained of great significance right up until the 20th century.

But there is something else besides genes that divides the human species into tribes and races and that is language and culture. To appreciate this we must now turn back to trace the role of language in the evolution of human community. Almost certainly human language originated as a means of communication, using grunts and gestures such as those still found in our nearest biological relatives - chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans. Indeed, we humans still resort to gesture when trying to find the appropriate word

But human language eventually became more than a mode of communication. What is so unique about it is this - sounds are used symbolically to become bearers of meaning. This is why the same object or idea can be indicated in different languages by greatly different assemblies of sounds. It is not too much to say that language is easily the most important thing that the human species has ever invented for it was the invention of language that enabled us to become human in the way we are today.

Of course no one person invented language as a whole, though even to this day one individual may coin a new word, which later becomes added to a commonly used vocabulary. The evolution of language was a long, collective process that never stops changing, which is why we cannot understand Chaucer and even have difficulty with Shakespeare. Furthermore, just as in biological evolution an original genus divided into species, so it is with language. By 1800 there were over 6000 species of human language, divided into family groups. There are over 800 languages in Papua-New Guinea alone! Language is the glue that binds human communities together - whether family, tribe and even race.

As the groups of sounds we call words became the bearers of meaning, so language became the medium for the creation of thought. In tracing the long process of evolution, Teilhard found two thresholds of change to be more significant than the others. The first was the transition from the mega-molecule to the cell, and this he called **biogenesis** - the coming into being of life. The second occurred when the invention of language gave rise to human thought. This transition Teilhard labelled 'noogenesis' - the coming into being of thought. By thought he meant more than simply conscious awareness, of the kind that we share with all the higher animals. Conscious awareness reaches a higher level when, as he said, "we not only know but know that we know". Indeed, this power we humans have, first to think (or reflect), and then to convey our thoughts to others, has opened up a great chasm between ourselves and all other living creatures.

Teilhard maintained that, as a result of noogenesis, the earth is now enveloped by a new kind of sphere in addition to the hydrosphere, the atmosphere, the biosphere and the

stratosphere already there. He called it the noosphere and it consists of the sum-total of all human thoughts. For a very long time this existed only in people's heads and was orally transmitted from generation to generation as a cultural inheritance. Only after the invention of writing did it find expression in books. I shall refer to Teilhard's noosphere as the human thought world.

We humans live simultaneously in two worlds - a physical world and a thought world which, from the age of about two, we absorb from our parents and others as we learn to speak. This thought world becomes the lens through which we understand and interpret the physical world that we experience through our senses.

The thought world constitutes the medium that enables individual persons to be active participants of a human community and this, in turn, receives its cultural identity from the thought world shared by all of its members. We have become increasingly aware of this in modern times as we have come to acknowledge that each cultural group sees and understands the world differently.

So, whereas for very long time, it the sharing of genes was the basis of community in family, tribe and race, this genetic bonding gradually began to be supplemented with a different kind of bonding - the sharing of a language-based culture or a common thought-world. That brings us to the last few thousand years when genetically-based tribal and racial divisions gradually became secondary to the formation of a new kind of community - a civilisation.

The key to civilisation is the commonality of language and culture. This involves a shared world-view, some shared basic convictions and a set of common practices, rituals and values by which to live. The British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), in his massive ten-volume *Study of History*, concluded that, within the span of known human history, he was able to discern the rise and fall of 26 civilisations. That which gives depth to a culture or civilization by formulating some meaning for human existence we refer to as its religion. So we often name a civilisation by the name of its religious tradition.

Over the last two thousand years three particular religious traditions, established civilizations bearing their name and they gradually spread out from their place of origin until they virtually carved up the surface of the globe among them. They are, in chronological order of origin - Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. By 1900 the world was roughly divided into the Christian West (including the Americas, Oceania and Australasia), the Islamic Middle East (stretching from Algeria to Malaysia) and the Buddhist Orient (China, Japan and Tibet and once including India). Each of these religious traditions had the capacity to create communities that transcended tribal and racial divisions. That which spread most widely was Christian civilization, particularly after the 16th century. This marked the beginning of human globalization and so great was the spread during the 19th century that about 1900 Christian missionaries were spurred on by the catch-cry "The evangelization of the world in our generation".

But this movement came to a halt by the mid-20th century, due mainly to two factors. First, the Christian races of Europe, instead of proceeding to draw the whole world into the global Christendom they hoped for, became embroiled in two World Wars. Second, and even more importantly, a radical cultural change made itself evident, one that is most appropriately referred to as secularization.

As we look back from this point in time we can see that this now widespread cultural change - secularization - is simply the final stage of a movement that began five hundred



years ago. The world-view that shaped the evolution of the Christian civilization had been evolving for 1500 years and reached a climax in the late Middle Ages in a four-tiered universe - heaven, purgatory, earth, hell. In the last five hundred years this world-view has been disintegrating level by level. The Protestant Reformers eliminated Purgatory in one fell swoop. By 1880 theologians were questioning the existence of Hell on moral grounds and began to eliminate it from their view of reality. During the 20th century the reality of heaven has been slowly disappearing from Christian consciousness, as the radical change in funeral ceremonies bears witness. Then in the 1960's the more radical theologians announced the death of God.

The scientific enterprise coming out of Western Christendom has opened up an entirely different world-view. We now see ourselves living on a tiny planet which exists in a bewilderingly vast cosmos of billions of galaxies. Because of this radical change of world-view, the classical form of the Christian cultural tradition is no longer spreading around the world as it was until 1900 and is now experiencing its death-throes. We may judge the 20th century to be the last Christian century. Indeed, all the great religious traditions of the past have now reached their "to be used by" date. They are being displaced by the secular and scientifically-based world-view that has emerged out of the Christian West and is spreading around the globe. Some future historians may even look back and decide that the year 2001 AD should be re-designated 1 GE to mark the beginning of the new Global Era.<sup>1</sup>

Some judge this to be the end of religion but this depends on the definition of religion. About the only thing one can say that all the great religions have in common is this: religion offers an interpretation of life and a way to live it.

In the last book he wrote, *Mankind and Mother Earth*, 1976, Arnold Toynbee pointed out that "the underlying essence of religion is as constant as the essence of human nature itself" and that "in the future as in the past...life will compel human beings to answer the ultimate questions in the intuitive unverifiable terms of religion". But since "every past expression of religion has been attuned to the intellectual outlook of its time and place", "the post-scientific and the pre-scientific expressions of religion may seem to be poles apart from each other".<sup>2</sup> Traditional Christianity is coming to an end just because it remains wedded to a world-view which has been made outmoded by the scientifically-based culture to which it gave birth.

In 2004 I delivered the Hudson lecture to the Wellington Branch of the Royal Society. (It is now published in *Reimagining God*, 2014.) In that I described how empirical science took root in Christendom, starting from small beginnings all arising from the notion of one Creator God. The first empiricist was probably Roger Bacon (1214-92) who used experiments in an attempt to discover what he called 'the ways of God'. Then, through William of Ockham (1300-49), Nicholas of Cusa (1400-1464), Francis Bacon (1561-1626) the path of empirical science gradually became more clearly defined. It is noteworthy that when the Royal Society was formed in 1660 on the basis of principles laid down by Francis Bacon, most of its members were clergymen. All of this led Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker (1905-2007) to call "modern science a legacy of Christianity".

The very last act of traditional Christianity, as we have seen, was the attempt to make the whole world Christian and, in doing so, it bequeathed to humankind a vision of a united

<sup>1</sup> See my trilogy: *Faith's New Age*, Collins, 1980; *The World to Come*, Bridget Williams Books, 1999; *Christianity without God*, Bridget Williams Books, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Mankind and Mother Earth*, p. 4.





human world - a global community. To this end it had been busy in the earlier part of the 20th century in setting its own house in order by promoting an ecumenical spirit whose aim was to draw all Christians into a unity by acknowledging that what they had in common was more important than what divided them. The church organization, as we have known it in the past, is now in the process of fragmenting and dying, but not before bequeathing to us a vision of a coming global community, of which the hope of establishing a global church provided a prototype and turned out to be a forerunner.

Already out of the Christian West, and in the attempt to prevent world war, there came first the League of Nations and second the United Nations Organization. The UN is the nearest we have to some kind of government of the global community. The next stage in its evolution will take place when the five permanent member of the Security Council surrender their power of veto in order to allow the UN to become truly democratic. (Incidentally this is something that was pleaded for by our own New Zealand representative, Peter Fraser, at the time of the foundation of the United Nations organization).

The UN points to how the coming global community will operate at the top level. But perhaps even more important is the way it will operate at the grass roots. Here we may now see even greater significance in the new technologies of our age for they increasingly link us all together in a complex myriad of personal relationships all around the world - from telephone, wireless and television to computer, internet, cell-phone, Facebook and Twitter. Further, international trade is leading us into a global economy where we depend on one another for our daily sustenance. National interests are becoming secondary to global interests, as exemplified in our common concern to plan for global warming. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the coming world community is now already here, even if only in an embryonic stage.

These features of worldwide human society today can be seen as the most recent examples of the proneness of the cosmos to form increasingly complex wholes. We should note that quite some time before we started to speak of globalization Teilhard coined the term 'planetisation'. By this he meant first, the way in which the human species scattered and diversified into races and cultures. Second, he prophesied that when humans had spread over the whole earth with nowhere else to go (and this has now occurred), a point in planetisation would be reached when the human race turns back upon itself to develop an even higher form of complexification. From now on, he said, all individual persons, all families, all tribes and all races will become incorporated into a new and even more complex entity - an harmonious global community. He said, "No evolutionary future awaits human beings except in association with all other human beings".

In this next stage of evolution individual persons are to become integral parts of a higher form of human life, just as the living cells in our body are all part of a more complex living whole and just as bees contribute to and are shaped by the spirit of the hive. We humans shall become, he said, a kind of super-society, which he described as "a harmonized collectivity of consciousnesses equivalent to a sort of super-consciousness". Such would be the end result of what Teilhard called the cosmic law of complexity-consciousness, by which he meant that the greater the complexity the higher the level of consciousness reached. He even hinted that the higher consciousness to come was for him God.

It is easy to jump to the conclusion that Teilhard's creative imagination has led him to be away with the fairies. Indeed, Raphael Patai, a Jewish anthropologist wrote, "Teilhard

embarks on a mythical-eschatological fantasy voyage that easily dwarfs every previous vision of the ultimate end of humanity". That may well seem so, but who would have thought in 1900 that the century ahead would not only see a man land on the moon but bring us all closer together by air travel, telephone, television, cell-phone and the internet. Indeed this, as I said above, is a sketch of the coming global community now in its embryonic stage. Teilhard believed this to be the eventual outcome of complexification and it manifests what Smuts called the proneness of the cosmos to form increasingly complex wholes.

In some respects, as I suggested above, Christendom was the forerunner of the coming global community. Christians spoke of what was to come as the Kingdom of God. But, as the Catholic Modernist, Alfred Loisy (1850-1940) said, "Jesus came preaching the coming of the Kingdom of God, and what arrived was the church!" To promote the coming of the Kingdom of God Christians of the first few centuries of founded the institution we know as the church. Eventually that institution became the problem by becoming an end in itself. Just as the Protestant Reformers found it necessary to break out of the authoritative institution to find the freedom they needed for personal faith, so at the 18th century Enlightenment people began to move out of the institution to be free to think for themselves. The freedom experienced in modern democratic secular society is actually much closer to the Kingdom of God promoted by Jesus of Nazareth than life in the church had become.

To find out what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God we simply have to turn to the parables, which start, "The Kingdom of God is like this and this". Whenever we treat one another like the Good Samaritan, like the father who welcomes home the prodigal, and whenever we turn the other cheek or show love to our enemies, there the Kingdom of God has already arrived. The modern secular and globalizing world emerged out of Western Christendom, taking with it the values learned from its matrix.

Think only, for example, how we have become concerned with human rights, enshrining them in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly. The first of its 30 Articles states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." The third states, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and freedom of person". Thus the United Nations Organization not only represents the institutional structure of the coming global community but has established a charter for life in the community that declares both the rights and the responsibilities which all humans have towards each other. Moreover they are in keeping with basic principles of life outlined by Jesus and which he described in his teaching of the Kingdom of God.

Of course there is much in human activities on the earth today which fall far short of the aims the United Nations or of the full realization of the Kingdom of God. In spite of that we are closer to becoming a global community than ever before in human history. It owes much to the Christian matrix out of which it has emerged. As Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker said, "the modern world is the result of the secularization of Christianity".

