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## Secular Earth Spirituality the evolutionary ground of our being

By Siddhartha\*

In this New Year season, as another year begins and life on the planet awaits another period of environmental battering, it is meaningful to reflect on the relationship between the earth and the values we are constructing.

Among other things, the Earth is a metaphor to suggest the divine memory of our origins, religious or otherwise... of where we came from.

The Rig Veda, dating back to around 4000 years ago, has this hugely evocative verse about the poetic mystery of our beginnings:

"Neither being nor non-being was as yet.  
What was concealed?  
And where?  
And in whose protection?...  
Who really knows?  
Who can declare it?  
Whence was it born, and whence came this creation?  
The gods were born later than this world's creation,  
So who knows from where it came into existence?  
None can know from where creation has arisen,  
And whether he has or has not produced it.  
He who surveys it in the highest heavens, he alone knows...  
Or perhaps does not know." (Rig Veda 10. 129)

Science states that the universe expanded from a 'particularity', something very small. This is popularly known as the 'big bang' and took place about 14 billion years ago. Some eminent scientists argue that before the big bang there was no space or time, something that our ordinary human minds cannot easily comprehend.

Did God exist before the big bang? Did s-he actually 'will' the big bang? (If they were around today, the philosophers of the ancient Rig Veda scriptures of India might respond by saying: 'who can tell'.)

Buddhism and aspects of Hinduism do not accept the notion of the creator God. Many who subscribe to secular spirituality may also agree.

But whether we agree or disagree on God most religious and spiritual perspectives will acknowledge, with varying differences, that the universe is pervaded by an energy that is at once perceptive and intelligent. The immanent nature of this energy is often evoked in poetry. It's a pity that not many people read poetry these days. At the risk of sounding clichéd I will quote Robert Blake, who epitomises the spiritually imbued nature of reality, the metaphysical wholeness of things:

"To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wildflower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour."

It is both a humbling and fulfilling experience 'to see a world in a grain of sand' rather than in all the glories that wealth, property and accumulation have to offer. Finding 'heaven in a wildflower' tells us that if we have the potential to see a flower as it really is we would have an experience of *nirvana*. We hold infinity in the palm of our hand when we learn to live in the here and now, when we feel the joy and pain of each moment. This does not take away from our capacity to build a more sustainable future. They are both part of the same whole. Experiencing 'eternity in an hour' reminds me of a friend's remark when I bemoaned the early death of my brother: "It does not really matter that you live to ripe old age; it is the

quality of your lived experience that matters. Even a few years of responsible and meaningful living is worth more than a whole lifetime”.

What Blake is saying is that the nature of the universe is spiritual energy, beauty and intelligence. This is what secular earth spirituality is about. But words are often interchangeable and we can also call it secular evolutionary spirituality.

Secular evolutionary spirituality suggests that just as life forms have evolved from simpler to more complex and sophisticated ones (for example from the single celled organisms to multi celled ones) human consciousness and spiritualities have now the potential to move up the spiral and put into practice the processes that can uphold the dignity of individuals, communities and the earth itself. Human rights and earth rights have also evolved with the evolution of our consciousness.

Thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin and Sri Aurobindo believed that human history and civilization were evolving into higher and higher forms of consciousness and greater spiritual depths. This is borne out by the last few thousand years of history. There is definitely an explosion of understanding and consciousness at all levels of endeavour: the personal, social, ecological and scientific.

However, some might argue that the opposite is also true and that human beings are simultaneously undergoing regressive pathologies that appear to buck the trend towards compassionate consciousness. They insist that we are not living in a dreamy world that is free from injustice, where people are only guided by compassion and altruism. While this charge is sadly true it does not take away from the overall drift, however precarious this may be, towards greater democratization, gender equality, minority rights and pluralism. What is more, there is considerable acceptance that good is better than bad, that kindness is preferable to selfishness, and that injustice is wrong. Here again, the practice might often be at odds with the just cited emerging consciousness. And, when it comes to ecology we are woefully lagging behind in both consciousness and practice, and we can only hope for rapid change before it is too late. We often forget we must tread softly on the earth for we tread on the dreams of our children and grandchildren.

Jiddu Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher, said: “We are the world, the world is us.” But long before this Chief Seattle, of the Squamish tribe of North America, stated the age-old wisdom of indigenous people in his well-known statement of March 11, 1854, that man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it, and whatever he does to the web he does to himself. To this day many adivasis in India share this vision, even if they are being driven against the wall by corporations and mining interests who steal their land and fell the forests.

We must add that this world and this Krishnamurtian us-ness are evolving in a Teilhardian sense, however unsteadily and erratically. To put it differently, the fullness and wholeness of life, or the non-dual nature of reality, is evolving. It is in the evolution of nature as a whole, of which the human is a part, that the divine is unfolding into fullness.

In the 1960’s the Christian theologian Harvey Cox had enthusiastically embraced secularism as an irreversible process through which society and culture would be liberated from “religious control and closed metaphysical worldviews”. Unfortunately, in the decades that have passed the sacred-in-the-secular has been transformed into the secular-in-the-marketplace. The secular is now intimately fused with the anti-ecological spirit of the global market and hyper-competitive individualism. The world of inter-being and interconnectedness seems a far cry although we have the illusion that the internet is connecting us. Religious fundamentalism is partly a knee jerk reaction to our present day secularism, which, interestingly enough, is sometimes referred to by religious extremists as secular fundamentalism. Still, secularism is very important to our world, but it must be of an inclusive nature that respects mystery and imagination; not the exclusive variety that is usually the antithesis of the sacred.

The non-dual nature of the universe is struggling to evolve in these difficult times. But market fundamentalism is doing its best to hamper this evolution. Only time will tell if we can change the tide. If we succeed at all in creating a more sustainable future for ourselves it will represent a triumph of what is non-dual and secular. It will represent the triumph of nurture and compassion. A wholeness, born out of the fusion of the secular and non-dual spirituality, has the potential to further the dignity of all human beings, and the integrity of our planet.

I would like to conclude with a well known quote from William Wordsworth which expresses the ineffable experience of immanence that nature offers us:

“And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean

and the living air,And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:A motion and a spirit, that impelsAll thinking things, all objects of all thought,And rolls through all things.”

\*Siddhartha, a writer and social activist, is the founder of the inter-religious centre, Fireflies Ashram, based in a village outside Bangalore, India. He is also the coordinator of the Meeting Rivers programme.