

KEVIN HUJING

Metropolitan State University of Denver

TRANSFORMING SCHEMA:
TOWARD AN INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

In a world of mounting ecological and economic crises we can look to our human made *world-system* and see that not only its structures and institutions, but their underlying values are near the root of the crisis. These structures and values have an emphasis towards differentiation, individualization, and profit/power seeking motives. These divisions are made manifest in our modern world through structural pursuits of 'development' and 'progress', often at the cost of environmental degradation and the exploitation of, and evasion from, the global poor.

These issues require a deep look into the cultural and psychological world-view that underlies and permeates our socio-structural systems. Specifically, the global capitalist world-view of western industrialized countries and its neoliberal framework,¹ which produces cultures of consumption, a rapidification of society, and a loss of an integral ecological vision. In order to begin addressing and potentially healing these issues of our world-system its socio-structural forms must change, which requires a transformation of the underlying cultural and psychological world-views that inform them, which further, requires us to change.

This change takes place through a *metanoia*, a change of heart, that can produce a new vision of integral ecology. This change of heart and the new vision that it produces has the potential to produce new world-views, and in turn, a new world system. In which differentiations may be overcome, and new solidarities, a new 'we' (the natural world and global poor included) can emerge.

The Capitalist World Schema

The modern world system operates as a vast and intricate socio-structural system that primarily takes the form of a world-

¹ Neoliberalism here is defined as a matrix and operation of power relations that are deployed through discourses, valuations, economic mechanisms and political structures that upholds the global schema of economics, politics and culture.

economy. This system transcends political boundaries, encompassing diverse cultures, languages, and economic and social activities.²At its core lies a matrix of relationships that are shaped by a division of labor that is not only related to various human communities but the natural world as well. This matrix of socio-economic activity forms the fabric of our global society. In 'Political Theology of the Earth' Catherine Keller presents this modern world-system as a *schema* of human construction, it is the 'form' or 'order', that grounds not only our political-economic structures, but also our world-view.³

The underlying logic that governs this world-schema often prioritizes short-term gains that inspire justifications for the exploitation of not only the global poor, but our shared environment as well, often ignoring long-term sustainability and any vision of interconnectedness. This current schema is global capitalism and its neoliberal framework which is rapidly degrading the planet and along with it, human life. This schema is passing away, it is being seen through, and crumbling under the weight of its contradictions that are reflected in the degradation of the planet as well as the well-being of humanity on a global scale.⁴ As it passes, we should look towards a new world, with new vision.

A major issue within our current world-order is the status of the environment. This human construction of the world, "treats the multiple self-organizing ecologies of the earth – geological, biological, climatic – as externalities irrelevant to its own organization of the world. This world schema with its extractions, exploitations, and extinctions ignores the fragilities of the world in which first the most vulnerable but soon the *all of us* will be in peril."⁵ The logic of neoliberalism that underlies our world-system, is bringing us into what Catherine Keller refers to as a *Capitalocene*, a transformation from the Anthropocene into a new state that "delivers nonhuman natures use-value to capital. With subsidies, tax breaks, and police backup, modern politics in its sovereign territoriality serves up non-human nature to capital accumulation."⁶ The Capitalocene is a world dominated by global capital and its exploitation of non-human nature, inspiring a culture of consumerism alongside a drive towards the maximization of profit at the expense of the global poor and the natural world. Consumerism

² Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis : An Introduction* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

³ Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*(Columbia University Press, 2018), 5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Ibid

further exacerbates this disconnect between our 'world' and the natural world by promoting a culture of accumulation and instant gratification. Our relentless pursuit of material wealth and accumulation not only contributes to overconsumption and environmental degradation but also fosters a sense of alienation and disconnection from nature and one another.

The neoliberal logic of our world-system that is bringing about the Capitalocene manifests itself in a variety of ways. One of the prevailing logics is *rapidification*, in Pope Francis Encyclical, 'Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home' he speaks to the issues in the neoliberal paradigm by bringing to light the short-term emphasis of rapidification, which he defines as "the rapid and constant change that is not geared towards human beings, and is a danger to the planet," a planet that "is beginning to look more and more like a pile of filth."⁷ This being the result of our *throw away culture*.

Furthermore our rapidification is characterized by a relentless pursuit of progress and growth which produces a *technocratic paradigm* that originates from our nearly two centuries of enormous technological change.⁸ From the telegraph to the smartphone and the railroad system to private jets, humanity has taken up technology and its development according to a one-dimensional paradigm. "The technocratic paradigm tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings."⁹ In this sense, technology tends to absorb everything into its own logic, surrounding us with a motive that isn't so much towards human well-being as it is towards profit and power, and views nature primarily as a resource to be exploited for human benefit. This paradigm fails to recognize the intrinsic value of the environment and disregards the complex web of interdependencies that sustain life on earth, as well as the well-being of the human community.

The Periphery

The effects of this short-term focus can be seen in its *external costs*, or *externalities*, such as "pollution as part of the cost of production. This cost is not paid by the factory owner or the

⁷ Francis and Catholic Church. United States Conference Of Catholic Bishops, *Laudato Si' : On Care for Our Common Home : Encyclical Letter* (Huntington, In: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015). Pg. 19.

⁸ Ibid, 74.

⁹ Ibid.

purchaser, but in the sickness of those who live near the factory. A part of the cost of the product is shifted onto victims outside the market exchange.”¹⁰ The problem of externalities challenges the dominance of the short-term priorities of economic growth. The narrow focus of the current economic system trains consumers in shallow thinking, in which consumers are encourage to ignore the broader connections of life and nature, and are endlessly presented a world that is not connected. The external-costs problem is both spatial and temporal, and those at the margins of our world-system, often referred to as the ‘periphery’, bear the costs of our systems production and consumption, without reaping any of the ‘benefits’ of being able to participate in our consumptive and accumulative lifestyle. The socio-structural violence inherent in the world-schema disproportionately affects marginalized communities at the periphery of the world-system. For example, in the Congo there exists a continual exploitation in which, “a vast subclass of humanity continues to eke out a sub-human existence in slave-like conditions at the bottom of the global economic order”¹¹ This is taking place within the rechargeable battery supply chain, which has billion-dollar generating technology and electric vehicle companies at one end, and the cobalt mines of the Congo, where workers earn only a few dollars a day while suffering immensely, at the other. These communities, often located in the ‘Global South’, bear the brunt of environmental degradation and resource extraction without reaping the benefits of economic development. As Siddharth Kara reveals in his book ‘Cobalt Red’, these Congolese miners, “exist at the edge of human life in an environment that is treated like a toxic dumping ground by foreign mining companies. Millions of trees have been clear cut, dozens of villages razed, rivers and air polluted, and arable land destroyed”¹² The phenomenon of external costs further exacerbates this disparity, as the environmental and social consequences of industrial activities are shifted onto the most vulnerable populations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and environmental injustice.

In his essay ‘The Theological and Economic Vision of Laudato Si’ Vincent J. Miller points out that the modern world-view through the technocratic paradigm, and its superficial ecology, “presumes a strong separation between the human subject and the rest of creation. Nature is viewed as something formless,

¹⁰ Vincent J. Miller, *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si’ Everything Is Connected* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2017), 22.

¹¹ Siddharth Kara, *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* (St. Martin’s Press, 2023), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

completely open to manipulation, with no intrinsic meaning in itself.”¹³ At the individual level, this disconnect manifests as a profound alienation – a sense of being differentiated and severed from our shared humanity, nature, and God. The cultural and psychological logics of rapidification and consumerism cultivate a shallow understanding of reality, leading to a lack of awareness and care for our interconnectedness with the earth and each other. As a result, individuals become detached from their surroundings, viewing nature as a commodity to be exploited rather than a sacred and interconnected web of life. The root of this issue is a deep spiritual alienation, a spiritual crisis, seen in our deep-seated habits of inattention and carelessness, and our lack of awareness. We are increasingly living in a culture of recklessness, within a globalization of superficiality, and the root of this issue is *sin*.

“Sin Marks Our Alienation”

Catherine Keller writes that, “sin marks our alienation”, which is “hugely systemic, collective, ‘original’, and carried into the global polis of our self-organization.”¹⁴ This culture of sin finds expression in the world-views, and their results of our dominant socio-structural system. Driven by a relentless pursuit of ‘progress’, and ‘growth’, we disregard the long-term consequences of our actions that perpetuate cycles of environmental degradation and social inequality. We also exist within a culture of accumulation and materialism that further alienates us from the natural world and from one another. We are born into a world, a schema, that is marked by division and domination. We no longer recognize interconnection, and in many ways, we are encouraged to ignore it. Instead, we are conditioned to view ourselves as isolated individuals, detached from the natural world, consumed by a culture of self-centeredness and instant gratification, with an increased habit of evasiveness. “Such evasiveness serves as a license for carrying out with our present lifestyle, and models of production and consumption.”¹⁵ These roots of alienation, recklessness, superficiality, evasiveness, and in short, sin, are the foundations and shortcomings of our world schema, and ourselves, that are severing our relationship with the natural world and our shared humanity. Our solutions to our crisis, ecological, economic, and

¹³ Miller, op. cit., 24.

¹⁴ Keller, op. cit., 146.

¹⁵ Francis and Catholic Church. United States Conference Of Catholic Bishops, *Laudato Si' : On Care for Our Common Home : Encyclical Letter* (Huntington, In: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), 38.

political must get to this root, and find a transformation of it that can stem upwards. This transformation is nothing short of a *metanoia*, a transformative change of heart, a spiritual conversion towards an *ethos of interconnectedness* that results from a vision of an *integral ecology*.

Metanoia

Metanoia first calls us to recognize the interconnectedness of all life forms and to embrace a vision of integral ecology rooted in compassion and solidarity. It begins at the cultural and psychological level, challenging the deeply ingrained habits of thought and behavior that perpetuate our alienation from nature and one another. This transformative process requires us to first, “engage in a kind of examination of conscious – searching out the deep sources of our alienation from God and the living world,”¹⁶ which engages a reorientation towards a long-term vision and a deep relationship with all of creation. It calls for a shift in consciousness – a recognition of our inherent connectedness with the earth and all its inhabitants. As we undergo a metanoia, a *change of heart*, we become agents of socio-structural change. At its core, metanoia is a call to cultivate a culture of loving awareness and solidarity, a recognition of our responsibility to care for the earth and its inhabitants. It is a journey towards reconciliation and a restoration of the bonds that connect us to one another, and to nature. Only through this transformative process can we transcend the limitations of our current world-schema and cultivate a new vision of the world – one rooted in compassion, interconnectedness, and ecological sustainability.

In our time humanity is being called to recognize the need for changes in lifestyle, production, and consumption. It is *we* who need to change. We lack awareness of our common origin, or of our mutual belonging, and also lack a vision of a future that is shared with everyone, the global poor, the non-human, and the earth itself. In order to achieve such a transformation, we need to examine our lives, and acknowledge the ways in which we have the creation, and each other through our actions and our failures to act. What needs converting is our cultures common assumption that we stand at the center of the universe, and that the earth is nothing but disposable resources at the service of our every desire. “The best way to restore our rightful place in creation is to recognize that the earth is not raw material to

¹⁶ Vincent J. Miller, *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si’ Everything Is Connected* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2017). pg. 113.

which we are entitled but a common home that is a gift from a loving God.”¹⁷

This metanoia brings about a cultivation of ourselves as well as the world that we create for ourselves. Our conversion requires the *cultivation of loving awareness*. A slower approach to life and a commitment to a more careful, attentive and responsible relationship with the living world. An awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creation, but joined in a universal communion. Without a profound renewal of our spiritual lives it will be impossible to create the response necessary to our current ecological and economic crisis. In order to cultivate the earth properly we have to act upon it properly, and in order to do that we must think about it properly. The contemplation of conversion and the cultivation of action are hand-in-hand.

Metanoia brings liberation, or, a cultural/psychological change precedes socio-structural change. In his book ‘An Ecological Theology of Liberation’, Daniel P. Castillo presents two levels to our human scheming; there is the socio-structural level, and the cultural/psychological. The socio-structural level “refers to the dimension of human life within which institutions and policies organize and structure society (especially the economic and material resources of society),” and the “cultural/psychological level refers to a more qualitative dimension of human life, it is the value systems, world views, and identities of human persons and their communities.”¹⁸ Daniel P. Castillo sees the cultural/psychological sphere of our world views and values as penetrating and informing the socio-structural institutions and policies of our economic and political schema. The inner logic that expresses itself in the forms that we see in the schema of our world. At the cultural/psychological level our values are skewed which leads to a distorted socio-structural schema. So, the transformation of the world schema, of the socio-structural forms, requires a transformation of our cultural/psychological roots, a reordering of our values and desires. When the cultural/psychological is liberated from its differentiating illusions, it gives rise to what Castillo calls, the ‘utopian imagination’. An imagination that is capable of both denouncing our distorted value systems and also announcing new value systems that can better organize the world at both

¹⁷ Groppe, Elizabeth T., “The Love That Moves the Sun and the Stars: A Theology of Creation” in Vincent J. Miller, *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si’ Everything Is Connected* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2017). Pg. 89.

¹⁸ Daniel Patrick Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation : Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2019). pg. 40.

the socio-structural level and the cultural/psychological in conformity with an integral ecology.

The metanoia that we have been discussing leads to a vision of integral ecology, which “can be understood on three levels: as an understanding that interconnection is the essence of reality, as a way of seeing that can perceive interconnections among humans and the rest of creation; and as a moral principle for acting in harmony with them.”¹⁹ This way of seeing coincides with a set of beliefs about the nature of reality that is attentive and adherent to our interdependence with the rest of creation. Integral ecology requires key elements, the first being a belief that interconnection is the essence of reality. Second is a view of interconnection among human and the rest of creation, which inspires us to seek to understand these connections. This understanding gives rise to an ethic, a moral principle of acting in harmony with our fellow humans and the rest of creation. In essence, an integral ecology develops a long-term valuing of relationships that are both social and ecological. Yet, it is more than just a moral principle, it is a way of seeing that seeks to be alert and attentive to our social and ecological interconnections. This integral ecology, at the cultural/psychological level comes with a new vision of the world, or, a new world-view. “The World” is no longer the schema of global capital and neoliberalism, “it becomes a collective schema of human self-organizing that is inextricably entangled in the non-human, in nature.”²⁰ In this world all of our crisis of war, economics, and social and ecological degradation are based. The world, or the earth we are on, locates all of these crises in the same home, on the same common ground, the earth. “These earthen entanglements foster the ground for a complex planetary public. The world needs a fresh meaning of ‘we’ to come together in an unprecedented new earth public.”²¹

The human collective is entangled in human and non-human systems which requires us to make our place in *the cosmic matrix of complex interconnectedness*, where the earth is the common ground, and where diverse coalitions can emerge at various locations; mutually cultivating a new vision. This *new public*, with its ethos of interconnectedness, “can surround and sabotage the schema of differential separations,”²² that sustains our human scheming which can no longer be abstracted from its environment, but must see itself in relationship with our human and non-human systems.

¹⁹ Miller, *op. cit.*, 11.

²⁰ Keller, *op. cit.*, 69.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, 49

²² *Op. cit.*

In embracing a new formulation of "we," rooted in the recognition of our shared humanity and interconnectedness with the Earth, individuals cultivate a sense of solidarity that transcends cultural, geographical, and ideological divides. Solidarity is the social dimension of love that looks at the social nature and source of our crisis, seeking a way to transcend them as a community, with a commitment to the common good. Catherine Keller defines solidarity as, "the firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, to the good of all and to each individual," rooted in the vision of our human interdependence regardless of our modern initiatives to individualize. The reality is that we're not born self-sufficient individuals, and all of us depend on others. This dependence isn't only a taking of what we need from others, but rather a truth that "we owe each other everything"²³ This solidarity extends to all beings on earth, including the marginalized and vulnerable, encompassing the swarm of crises that affect our planet – from environmental degradation and economic inequality to political conflict and war.

This new solidarity gives rise to *sympoiesis* – a "becoming-with" and "making-together" that emerges from the Earth itself. "An integration that can produce the complex human self-organization in mindful interdependence with the biosphere"²⁴, and with each other. It is a bottom-up process, emerging from the relationality of people and cultures in their variety and interconnection as human beings on the planet, that can challenge the top-down schema of differentiation and domination that neoliberalism projects, empowering communities to co-create and coexist in harmony with one another and with the natural world. In this process of *sympoiesis*, individuals and communities actively engage with the Earth, drawing inspiration from its wisdom and resilience to shape a more just and sustainable future.

In a time where our human-made economic and political systems are in decay, and the planet's natural systems are being continuously degraded, there are many seeking a transformation to these systems and schemas. However, this transformation cannot take place without a conversion of our own heart and cultures. With this necessary transformation made we can have real direction and potential for a new schema to emerge, a new socio-economic structure, and a new public

²³ Op. cit., 68.

²⁴ Op. cit., 91.

that is one with the earth and with humanity, bringing God's creation, us included, into its fullness. As we embark on this journey of metanoia towards an integral ecology, let us remain steadfast to a commitment towards cultivating loving awareness, solidarity, and stewardship. For it is through our collective efforts and vision of interconnectedness that we can transcend the limitations of our current schema and co-create a world that honors the inherent dignity and interconnectedness of all life.