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Author explores new creation story in 'The Holy Universe'

Sharon Abercrombie | Oct. 22, 2013 Eco Catholic

One of the first sparks of inspiration for David Christopher's 21st-century take on a creation story ignited more than 30 years ago. It came as a result of a TV program.

Christopher, author of *The Holy Universe: A New Story of Creation for the Heart, Soul, and Spirit* (New Story Press: Santa Rosa, Calif.), recalls his 8-year-old self watching a nature show one afternoon on his family's old gray couch. The images horrified him: a desecrated land where species have gone extinct and where ranchers shoot prairie dogs, "blowing them to pieces with rifles because the animals are considered pests."

"I am shocked at how cavalier the ranchers are," Christopher wrote.

As the program continued to show scene after scene of the last remaining animals of their species, he began to sob, unable to believe the amount of destruction allowed to happen. His father attempted to console him, but the effort rang hollow.

"He was bewildered," Christopher said. "I remember him saying, 'My God, son, of course this is something to be concerned about but certainly not something worth being so upset over.' "

In effect, his father told him, "It's a shame, but it is the price of modernity," Christopher recalled to *NCR* during a recent interview.

He didn't have the words as a child to explain the depths of his grief, he said, but knew in his heart that the suffering and extinction of wildlife "was certainly something worth being upset over."

Now possessing the words, Christopher expresses in *The Holy Universe* his compassion and concerns through a new creation story. Raised Episcopalian, he drifted away from the church in high school.

"But even so, I loved growing up with the sound and cadence of the [King James version] of the Bible. I missed the poetry of the creation story that the facts of science don't offer," he said.

The King James Bible serves as a core model of Christopher's hope-filled story, one that could serve as a catechism for spiritual ecology. It begins with a man, identified only as the Seeker, and his wife attending a party where he meets a wise woman known as the Sage.

Out of work and depressed, the Seeker shares part of his story with the Sage, who suggests they meet for further conversations. Their talks take place in an array of settings -- coffee shops, bookstores, redwood forests, beaches and mountaintop parks in northern California -- and explore the unfolding of the universe from its beginning to the Earth's creation to the appearance of human beings.

The fictional dialogue between the Seeker and Sage moves through time "all the way to our present-day crises," Christopher says at the book's website [1], "spurring humanity toward what the Sage calls the 'Great Transformation' -- the enormous global changes we are now facing as a species."

The author posits we have arrived in the middle of a major environmental crisis because we have let go of an important soul story -- that of Ancient Mind. Ancient Mind lived on the premise that the universe is sacred and that Earth requires honor and care. But as civilization unfolded, Modern Mind evolved, bringing with it a new story of dominance over a dead, inert Earth.

The only way through our global-sized dilemma is to create a new story, Christopher said. The Sage calls it Planetary Mind, a combination of Ancient Mind and an evolved Modern Mind -- one that begins turning its often-miraculous technology and know-how toward compassionate service to the entire world.

"Churches will need to be part of Planetary Mind by relaxing their ideology and moving into a sense of communion with creation," Christopher said.

"Ancient Mind has never gone away nor quite possibility will Modern Mind, but Planetary Mind still has a way to go before it becomes the dominant worldview in our global societies," he said.

One of the most memorable vignettes in Christopher's fable takes place when the Sage and the Seeker look at the downsides of his new job as a home construction supervisor. The work requires him to cut corners in order to save money, yet his company throws away perfectly good materials instead of recycling them.

The Sage poses a question that emerges as the major functioning template for Planetary Mind: "Of all the options and choices available to you, which of them looks more like a picture of your own soul?"

Does it mean "constructing a house as inexpensively as possible, or a house built as carefully as possible," she asks, emphasizing the question, "magically takes you out of your habitual narrow views and taps into something that knows what to do."

"But we live in the real world and sometimes there just isn't the money to do something the careful way," the Seeker replies, but after pondering the idea, says "Although that sounds kind of crazy, doesn't it?"

"Questions like these help to reveal the craziness in our systems ... and shows us how to get to the inner wisdom that Modern Mind has walled off," the Sage responds.

In the Sage -- who Christopher described as a marginalized woman of color whose "recent ancestors are from every continent" -- you can see the ideas of Dominican Sr. Miriam MacGillis, founder of Genesis Farm, and Buddhist ecologist Joanna Macy, both beloved mentors of the spiritual ecology movement. Indeed, Christopher references MacGillis among the thinkers whose ideas he used as a basis for his book. Others include Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and Sidney Leibs.

Christopher connected with their teachings after, like the Seeker, experiencing dissatisfaction with a number of careers. In 2000, he reached a watershed moment in his life and woke up to the ecological devastation taking hold of the world, bringing back memories of the afternoon he grieved because of a television show.

Eventually, he connected with the Pachamama Alliance [2], a San Francisco-based environmental education activist group that group that sponsors workshops combining indigenous and modern worldviews to find solutions for a sustainable world. It was a 2005 symposium that compelled Christopher to write his book. A presentation on the possibilities of a new world story left him wanting to create something that built off the

ideas of Berry, MacGillis and others.

"They kept saying that we needed a new story, and I asked Duane Elgin [the author of *Voluntary Simplicity*] why they just didn't write it," Christopher told *NCR*.

Elgin turned to him and replied, "Why don't you write it?"

From that challenge emerged *The Holy Universe*, which offers these discerning questions: Whatever you do, does it look like a picture of your own soul? What story are you telling yourself that will help you create a holy and beautiful portrait?

Christopher expanded on the idea of minding one's story in a recent essay [3], likening the process to meditation.

"It is practicing catching oneself in the midst of a story and consciously changing it as it is needed," he said.

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