



The end of the world as we know it: changing geographies of ignorance and knowledge, hope and faith

O fim do mundo como nós o conhecemos:
mudando geografias da ignorância e do conhecimento, esperança e fé

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Abstract

Here I wish to report on developments on three fronts concerning 'religion' in expanding global debates about the 'the end of the world' and 'the ways we know it', concerning: (1) the word 'religion' itself, as half of the religion-science binary, and its marginalization—or complete absence—in the construction of the modern scholarly disciplines and university departments, and influencing of 'modern' culture and politics; (2) proliferating doubts about the positivist (and secularist) epistemology of modern 'science'; and (3) the growing sense that we are caught up in epochal transitions, in which we are significant actors, and that, far beyond what we can know 'scientifically', our responses involve leaps of hope and faith which contribute to tipping the balance among divergent possible futures.

Keywords: Religion and science, Culture, Time transitions, Modern epistemology, Hope, Faith

Resumo

7Este artigo gostaria de informar sobre a evolução que está se dando em três frentes relativas à "religião", na ampliação do debate global sobre o "fim do mundo" e "as formas como o conhecemos", tendo em conta: (1) a palavra "religião" em si, como metade meio do binário religião-ciência, e sua marginalização ou completa ausência na construção das modernas disciplinas acadêmicas e departamentos universitários, e influenciando a cultura "moderna" e a política; (2) a proliferação das dúvidas sobre a epistemologia da "ciência" moderna, positivista (e secularista); e (3) o sentimento crescente de que estamos presos em transições de época, nas quais somos atores importantes e que, muito além do que podemos saber "cientificamente", nossas respostas envolvem saltos de esperança e fé, que contribuem para inclinar a balança entre diferentes futuros possíveis.

Palavras-chave: Religião e ciência, Cultura, Transições de época, Epistemologia moderna, Esperança, Fé

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"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now."
Rom 8,22

"This third millennium of the Western world, pointing towards a mutation in our situation, requires from us a notion of what it means to be human, of what it means to be divine, of what is the world in which we live and for which we share the responsibility".

Raimon Panikkar, 1995

"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"
(1 Cor 1,20)

Introduction

The most important 'sign of the times' in the last half-century has been the cascading eruptions around the world of global social justice movements (GSJM).¹ In the churches this resurgent spirit of hope for marginalized peoples and causes burst out in liberation and contextual theologies: Latin American liberation theology, black and Hispanic theologies in the U.S., feminist theologies, black and liberation and contextual theologies in Africa, indigenous spiritualities, Caribbean liberation theologies, gay and lesbian theologies, theology of struggle in the Philippines, Minjung theology in South Korea, Sri Lankan liberation theologies, Dalit theology in India, Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean theologies, proliferating theologies of inter-religious dialogue and activism. These "new" voices were joined by those yearning for peace, protesting the arms race and the deepening shadows of nuclear Armageddon, and by a growing chorus of voices seeking to speak on behalf of the earth, pointing to the ecological crises of industrial civilization. By the early 2000s according to one guesstimate, there were "over one – and maybe even two– million organizations working toward ecological sustainability and social justice" (HAWKEN, 2007). The emergence in 2001 of the World Social Forum as a meeting place for the world's others signaled a new stage of global dialogues and

¹ In the World Social Forum, in particular, there is an increasingly shared sense of convergence among 'left' or 'progressive' social movements. But there is no widely accepted list of or terminology about the relationships between 'old' (socialist, labour, Marxist) and 'new' movements, including feminist, ecological, anti-racist, indigenous, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer), peace, movements of disabled or differently-abled people, etc. In this essay, GSJM includes this rapidly expanding list of movements. See SANTOS, 2006, 160.

collaboration across the obstacles and barriers which have historically divided peoples, opening new possibilities for solidarity, and creating new horizons in the struggles for solidarity, social justice, eco-justice and peace worldwide—“another world is possible’. And new voices and movements continue to erupt around the world—in Arab uprisings, Occupy Wall Street, Idle No More among indigenous peoples in Canada, *indignados* and anti-austerity movements in Europe, and growing lists of others.

Clearly the central axes of social life revealed by these movements—class, gender, race, nature/civilization, sexual orientation, violence/peace, etc.—remain central. But the cumulative effects of these developments among social movements, and in the critical scholarship inspired by them, adds up to far more than a growing list of oppressions. For they are contributing to the vast expansions of our horizons on the past, present, and possible futures. And in the midst of rapidly developing (and unevenly distributed) new capacities to organize and act—from nanoscale to planetary scales and into the heavens beyond (satellites visiting distant planets, even escaping the boundaries of the solar system itself)—along with new materials (nanotechnologies), new processes of creation and new life forms (biotechnologies), and the accumulating human impacts on the environment, the world as we have known it is rapidly being left behind.

But the path ahead is uncertain. The limits and contradictions of established traditions of knowledge and authority have also becoming more evident, and knowledge wars have erupted, perhaps more intensely not only between traditions but within them too.

This turmoil is evident across the modern sciences, and their home in universities.

It is also evident—and shocking to true believers in the secularist dogma of its inevitable disappearance—that ‘religion’ has moved back into the center of public debates on every front. As we in the circles of Christian liberation theologies and

interfaith activism well know, this is a complex story, involving intense debates and conflicts within communities (e.g., liberation currents versus fundamentalisms), the deaths of old gods and institutional decline (e.g., of mainstream Christian churches in the global North)² and exuberant expansion (e.g., evangelical and fundamentalist christianities in the global South). And this story is far from over.

These developments are also challenging the century-and-a-half-long secularist orthodoxy enshrined in the birth of ‘science’ in modern Europe and its subsequent flourishing in the US especially, and its influence in modern liberal and progressive cultural and political circles. And in recent years activists and scholars around the world are also busily reframing the ways we experience and see ‘religion’.

Precisely because ‘religion’ is so entangled in shaping the modern world and the ways we see it, there is no simple way of untangling all the threads of this story, no single discourse or narrative of stories which are unfolding in different ways in different places with different traditions, confronting specific conjunctures and priorities. But it is possible to point to certain widely shared, if partial and tentative conclusions. Here I wish to report on developments on three fronts concerning ‘religion’ in expanding global debates about the ‘the end of the world’ and ‘the ways we know it’: (1) concerning the word ‘religion’ itself, as the other half or the faith-science binary, and its marginalization—or complete absence—in the construction of the modern scholarly disciplines and university departments; (2) proliferating doubts about the positivist (and secularist) epistemology of modern ‘science’, and quests for more inclusive and also more modest epistemologies and ecologies of knowledge; and (3) the growing sense that we are already caught up in epochal transitions, in wide-ranging processes of (re)creation, in which we are significant actors, and that, far beyond what we can know with reasonable certainty, our responses involve leaps of hope and faith which contribute to tipping the balance among divergent possible futures.

²*Voices* dedicated an issue to different perspectives on the transition from religions as we have known them to a post-religious (in their terms ‘post-religional’) future (EATWOT, 2012).

1 'Religion' Is the Problem

'Religion' is at the heart of the confusion about religion, as a proliferating historical studies confirm (MADURO, 2004, p. 221-234).

In the great explosions of activism and scholarship in recent decades, provoked especially by the eruptions of 'liberation' activisms as well as of 'fundamentalist' (Christian, Muslim, Buddhist) activisms, 'religion' has become increasingly visible even in previously secularist circles, and problematic (along with its binary twin 'the secular'). In the midst of swirling terminological and theoretical turmoil, it is impossible to find a single overarching definition, never mind a single overarching theory. In practice many activists are suspending debate on such matters altogether while they work at pragmatically stitching together coalitions across religious, secular, and other differences. For their part scholars are busy on many fronts: calling attention to the blinders built into disciplinary foundations;³ calling for re-mapping disciplinary boundaries and evolving beyond them in new forms of interdisciplinary / unidisciplinary (WALLERSTEIN, 1991) collaboration; empirically filling in gaps and developing more refined, complex, multi-layered, dynamic accounts of particular religious beliefs and practices, cultures, communities, and institutions, in particular times and places; announcing the death of 'secularism'; (ROBERTSON, 2007, p. 9-34) and welcoming the dawning of a new 'post-secularist' era.⁴

These developments are expressions of the proliferating critical 'deconstructions' of the evolving hegemonic projects of 'modernity', 'modernization' and 'development', 'capitalist world-system', more recently (neoliberal) 'globalization' and 'empire'. As it is still widely understood, the term

³ For example, political scientist Lynch refers to the 'fifty-year sleep' from which scholars are only just awakening (LYNCH, 2009, p. 381). Concerning US sociology see SMITH et al (2013, p. 903-938).

⁴ 'Postsecular' is an ambiguous term, since, it may be understood to imply that there was a widespread 'secular' era in which 'religion' everywhere was declining or had already disappeared, but which is now mysteriously re-emerging; the same applies to the notion of the 'resurgence of religion'. In my judgment, a more accurate term is 'postsecularist', pointing more precisely to the rise and fall of the discourse of secularism, which was dominant in Western scholarship and politics, and leaving open empirical questions about the rise and decline in particular places of particular religious cultures, communities, and institutions, the historically shifting boundaries among 'religions', 'cultures', 'politics' and 'economies', and, sometimes, religious renewal of particular traditions and their renewed and also transformed social significance.

was ‘invented’ in the 19th century (McCUTCHEON, 1997; PETERSON & WALHOF, 2002; MASUZAWA, 2005). And, given the resulting confusion, some scholars today dream of abolishing the term ‘religion’ altogether, in the same spirit that some dream of abolishing ‘culture’, ‘politics’, and ‘economy’.⁵

Still, in this terminological turmoil, some patterns are becoming clearer, concerning ‘religions’ and the scholarly and political discourses about ‘religion’—and their relationships to power, in the distant past and in the modern present.

For our purposes here, one trend is especially important. Since the dawn of civilizations 5,000 years ago, there has been a tendency among elites to forge religious outlooks in individualistic, ‘spiritual’, and ‘otherworldly’ terms. Reflecting the expanded horizons of middle class personal lives and choices with the rise of large-scale civilizations, and perhaps also the anomie and alienation accompanying awareness of expanding inequalities and suffering for the majorities, this mode of religiosity centered on individualistic spirituality, meaning, beliefs, and identity in an (allegedly) autonomous sphere of life separate from economics and politics. As recent scholars have shown, these tendencies cut across classical Buddhism, the ‘classical’ religions of the ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, ancient Judaism, the ancient Roman cult of the emperor.⁶

Moreover, with their role in creating and preserving public documents, elite religious experiences and reflections have predominated, resulting in their being over-represented in the records studied by modern scholars, and thus in their constructions of ‘religion’. With the great expansion of the middle classes in the modern world in the 20th century, and of universities with their Westernized middle class professors and students, this kind of religion flourished; and these views were enshrined in the formation of the dominant discourses as the modern sciences and their ‘other’, ‘religion’. (HORSLEY, 2003, p. 13). And the history of ‘religion’ was framed as ‘progress’: from ‘primitive’, ‘irrational’, ‘superstitious’,

⁵ As Wallerstein points out, “if I knew how to get rid of the separate vocabularies of politics, economics, and culture, I’d be much further ahead.” (WALLERSTEIN, 2008).

⁶ For overviews of recent scholarship, see HORSLEY, 2003, p. 13–42.

‘magical’ religions to highly individualized, spiritualized, rational and ethical, private and modern ‘religion’, or, in secularist accounts, to the disappearance of religion altogether with the emergence of secular values and modern rational individuals.

At the same time, critical scholars are demonstrating that the othering of ‘religion’ was central in fostering the unquestioning, sacred aura and authority of science as ‘neutral’, ‘value free’, ‘objective’, and ‘universal’, of the creation of the secular sphere of the allegedly ‘free market’, and of the secular bureaucratic rationality of expanding state structures and programs.⁷

Over the course of the last century and a half this discourse deeply impacted thinking of influential social actors and governments, including many progressive movements and scholars (up to and including postcolonial studies - YOUNG, 2001, p. 338). Indeed, many religious elites adopted this framework too, in new contexts reframing their own religious spaces, educating and shaping the consciences of their adherents, and (re)negotiating public space and support for their communities and institutions.

But, as the voices of oppressed groups and communities have repeatedly confirmed, the experiences, sufferings, and hopes of the majority differ from those of middle class elites—as ‘liberation’ theologians critically engaging their own traditions insistently point out. Religious communities include great internal diversity, with different, even conflicting, interpretations of their traditions and their significance in addressing contemporary debates. There is growing recognition of the myriad forms of religiosity, indeed of the fact that many languages do not even have a word for ‘religion’,⁸ rejection of essentialist views of

⁷ See VÁSQUEZ & FRIEDMAN, 2003, p. 19; and HORSLEY, 2003, p. 40.

⁸ As French Marxist philosopher Étienne Balibar has confessed: “I have my doubts about the significance of religion in today’s political discourse. I fear this can be a very western – I am wondering if the category of ‘religion’ itself is not part of what Edward Said called Orientalism” (BALIBAR, 2007).

religion as a single, unchanging phenomenon, and efforts to demythologize both ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’.⁹

There is also growing recognition that religious traditions have never been static and unchanging. Other peoples and their traditions are not closed and static. They have not been standing still. They have continued to evolve. They cannot in any simple sense be defined primarily in terms of ‘modernity’, as pre-modern, or modern, or postmodern.

Rather, as a new wave of decolonial scholars propose, they are transmodern.¹⁰ Without in any simple sense converting to modernity, rather they have engaged in “transforming tradition in a traditional way” (ESTEVA, 2001, p. 122). For example, traditional communities, as Sardar says of Islam, “reinvent and innovate tradition constantly. Indeed, a tradition that does not change ceases to be a tradition” (SARDAR, 2004). And in the process these religious traditions have contributed to multiple ‘modernities’ combining different elements and dynamics of both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ traditions (THERBORN, 2003, p. 293-305).

Today these traditions, with their strong religious and cultural links to the past, do not in any simple sense contain ‘answers’ to questions in a world being so profoundly re-shaped by modern developments in human knowledge, technologies, modes and scales of social organization, where the contours of reality and possibility are changing so profoundly. As at other major turning points in history when social- and-natural worlds are changing so radically, all existing traditions of knowledge, hope and faith, forged in different circumstances, are also challenged, to extinction, or to fundamental reorientations, radical conversions, and renewal. But, within these traditions, there are many diverse strands, which respond to the changes in different ways, including creative expressions of “critical and open traditionalism that uses the historic past to create a bright future”. (INAYATULLAH, 2005).

⁹ As Casanova points out, claims of the progressive “evolution of humanity from superstition to reason, from belief to unbelief, from religion to science” is really a myth in need of ‘desacralization’” (CASANOVA, 1994, p. 17).

¹⁰ This movement is most prominent among Latin American scholars; see DUSSEL, 2002, p. 221–244.

Thus, for example, Inayatullah argues that in the whirlwinds sweeping the world today

The Islamic world stands both as an imagined past—feudal, low-tech—but also as a civilization based on an alternative distinction between the public and the private, between individual space and collective space and between the secular and the religious. (INAYATULLAH, 2005).

In addition, in many ways Islam—and other religious traditions—re-framed in this way—are contributing to the emergence of a ‘post-secularist’ and ‘post-Western civilization’.

2 Beyond (Positivist) Science

Doubts about the alleged certainties of Western modes of natural and social science, including economics, are spreading like wildfire (LAL, 2002, p. 139–155; WEILER, 2004). Indeed, announcements of disciplines in decline, even ‘disciplines in ruins’ (READINGS, 1997, p. 583–592), are proliferating like wildfire, along with deep crises in universities which have been their home. So far, though, the epistemological dimensions of the secularist religion-science binary remain underdeveloped (BOCK; FEUCHTER; KNECHT, 2008, p. 9–10).

In part, this is a story of the changing nature of knowledge itself. The 20th century was marked by vast expansions of the multifaceted processes of knowledge production—schools and universities, libraries, scholarly associations, conferences, publishers, journals, newsletters, corporate research departments, government departments, new technologies of data gathering and processing. These developments are vastly expanding the pools of ‘knowledge’, accelerating exponentially the self-reinforcing processes of knowledge production, in the process "changing the nature of scientific inquiry and its application to the great

challenges facing mankind [sic]."¹¹ They are also vastly expanding the circles of educated people, and of experts.

As we know, this is also a story of the eruptions of ‘new’ voices of the historically marginalized peoples and constituencies reflected in the GSJM—such as Third World peoples, the poor, women, people of color, indigenous peoples, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer (LGBTQ) people, and all those speaking on behalf of the Earth. They have been central in vastly expanding dialogue and debate on every front, and in enlarging the realm of experience and inventories of traditions for interpreting the world.

In particular, in a variety of ways, they have exposed the ‘Eurocentric’ character of the assumptions and frameworks concerning nature (‘creation’ in theological terms), human nature, human destiny and the course of history, that marked the foundations and cultures of the modern natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, and their organization into disciplines and departments of modern universities, which, though under assault from within and without, remain dominant. They have repeatedly confirmed that there is no simple, linear path of progress in knowledge. They have shed light on the expanding, not shrinking, realms of absences (resulting from the repression of other traditions and modes of knowing), losses (resulting from the death of many communities and traditions, especially indigenous peoples), distorted priorities and waste, the deliberately mass-produced ignorance of corporate media and government propaganda and public relations departments. The development of knowledge remains profoundly—and increasingly—distorted by power and wealth. Clearly, the discourses of the modern sciences and humanities are centrally involved in expanding social divisions and gaps, such as the growing technological and digital divides between rich and poor. They are deeply implicated in producing the other major problems confronting humanity and other species; in the eyes of many, they

¹¹ U.S. NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR CODATA. Committee on Issues in the Transborder Flow of Scientific Data. **Bits of Power: Issues in Global Access to Scientific Data**. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1997. p. 16.

have failed humanity. Indeed, deepening awareness of these contradictions and limits suggests another original sin in modern projects for (re)constructing the world: an epistemological sin like the first one, the “sin of modernism.” (DELORIA JUNIOR, 2002, p. 163).

At the same time, there is growing awareness among scholars of the expanding realms of the unknown accompanying every breakthrough, of ignorance and surprise (GROSS, 2010), as new questions become possible, and of the persistent, also expanding, realms of mystery, e.g., questions beyond current capacities even to imagine answering ‘scientifically’, like those concerning the significance of life for the universe, or the significance of humanity in the long-range evolution of life on earth, or the structures and dynamics of the pluriverse of multiple universes and their significance for our universe.

These developments are central in the growing awareness of the limits of divisions among scholarly disciplines, theoretical frameworks, and methods (McEVOY, 2007, p. 383-402), and in the development of new generations of theoretical frameworks incorporating complexity, emergence, and uncertainty. As one interdisciplinary team points out:

Complex socio-ecological systems share a number of fundamental properties that require changes in scientific methods, criteria of truth and quality, and conceptual frameworks. These properties include non-linearity, plurality of perspectives, emergence of properties, self-organization, multiplicity of scales, and irreducible uncertainty. (GALLOPÍN et al, 2001, p. 219-229).

Numerous initiatives are underway for new interdisciplinary / multidisciplinary / transdisciplinary / postdisciplinary / postscientific paradigms in the natural and social sciences (WALLERSTEIN et al 1996), including history, and the humanities, and evident in religious studies and theology, especially in the proliferation of liberation and contextual theologies, eco-theologies, and interfaith theologies.

These developments are accompanied by radical expansion of epistemological horizons with growing appreciation of irreducible epistemological, theoretical, and methodological diversity. As Santos points out, “there is no sense in attempting to grasp the world by any single general theory, because any such theory will always presuppose the monoculture of a given totality and the homogeneity of its parts.”(SANTOS, 2004, p. 122). Thus epistemological humility and cognitive justice are central to any hope for greater insight, for ‘truth’ around which we organize our lives and wager our futures, individually and collectively (MADURO, 2012, p. 87-103). And they are promoting experiments in new epistemologies, philosophies and ethics of science¹² and in reinventing schools (Chan-Tiberghien, 2004, p. 191-213) and universities (ALVARES, 2004) around the world.

So, the boundaries among mystery, ignorance, knowledge, uncertainty, probability, hope, and faith are shifting. People are experimenting with alternative epistemologies beyond methodological modernism (EZZAT, 2004, p. 40-58), which, far from refusing the advances of modern sciences, place them “in the context of the diversity of knowledges existing in contemporary societies” (SANTOS; NUNES; MENESES, 2007, p. xx). They are drinking deeply from the well-springs of other ways of seeing, values and ethical frameworks, modes of personal and collective identity, discipline, and solidarity and activism. They are weaving other discourses of hope, and expressions of ‘faith’ in a Being / Force / Spirit transcending historical trends and constellations of power, and pointing to other possible futures.

¹² See JASANOFF (2003, p. 223–244); for a political document reflecting a new ‘epistemological humility’ see ANOTHER Future is Possible, 2012.

3 (Re)Creating the World

In the midst of information explosions and knowledge revolutions in the emerging planetary civilization of the 21st century, the battles over knowledge and its limits are more central than ever. And reaching agreement about important issues is more complex and difficult than ever. Old categories and frameworks are increasingly inadequate, because of flaws and limitations in the original formulations which have become clearer in subsequent scholarship, and because of a rapidly changing world. We are at early stages in forging a new ecology of knowledge. As the experience of GSJM and related scholarly debates makes clear, there is no scholarly discipline with monopoly on discerning the most important issues; there is no single widely-accepted critical discourse for analyzing social-ecological dynamics, identifying levers of change, envisioning alternatives, charting paths forward. In this world in upheaval activists' good will and common sense are forging new paths far beyond the limits of current theoretical frameworks. And there is a growing sense that theory in the old sense of overarching, unitary discourse is no longer desirable, or even possible!

Contrary to postmodern claims of endless relativism,¹³ by the end of the 1990s there were signs of a growing convergence across social movements addressing a wide range of issues in targeting the project of (neoliberal) 'globalization' as central to struggles around the world. This discourse is commonly presented, by its proponents and critics both, as an economic doctrine, reflected in lower taxes, reducing regulations, downsizing and privatizing many government programs, promoting the rights and prerogatives of corporations and markets, negotiating free trade agreements, imposing structural adjustment programs, etc. And by the late 1980s and early 1990s its supporters were presenting it as the reigning wisdom in the science of economics, allegedly expressing a consensus (the 'Washington consensus') among economists. They pointed to the tearing down of the Berlin wall (1989) and fall of the Soviet Union (1991) as proof that, in the words

¹³ See SANTOS, 2006, p. 20-21; and for a Christian theological perspective, see PHAN, 2008, p. 49-50.

of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, ‘there is no alternative’. They announced that it marked ‘the end of history’, and the dawning of the new era of global capitalism and “Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” (FUKUYAMA, 1989, p. 3-18). They promoted it widely as the new ‘common sense’ in the offices of political parties and policy makers in government and the mainstream media.¹⁴ And they succeeded in making ‘capitalism’ and any questions about it disappear from economics textbooks and the programs of university economics departments and business schools, and from the mainstream media (HEILBRONER, 1998, p. 1-7).

There is no doubt that economic struggles over land and labor and capital and markets are central in the modern world, and that vastly expanding production, distribution and consumption of goods and services have radically transformed societies everywhere. And for one hundred and fifty years, despite crisis after crisis, the architects of ‘modern’ projects of markets, colonies and empires have asserted that ‘progress’—in knowledge (‘science’), technology, and markets—is the central law of human history, and that promoting ‘capitalist’ values and culture and ideology, institutions and structures is the key to endlessly expanding freedom, prosperity, affluence, individual freedom, and peace. After every crisis—like the linked crises marking the first half of the 20th century, World War I, Great Depression, and World War II—reformed coalitions of elites and their supporters have drawn on this tradition in reasserting their agenda (ARRIGHI; SILVER, 1999, p. 271-272).

In the latest wave of elite reconstruction and expansion since the 1970s associated with neoliberal globalization they have succeeded again in making this doctrine common sense in powerful circles, in the curricula of economics departments, the headquarters of corporations and political parties, the legal systems of governments around the world, the agendas of international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, expanding

¹⁴ See THE PROGRESSIVE Conservative Party of Ontario, 1994).

webs of 'free-trade' agreements and the major media. Indeed, at each transition, they have expanded their claims in terms of geographical reach (since 1989 the whole world) and domains of life, now including the transubstantiation of culture and knowledge into 'intellectual property', democracy into 'governance', and the 'marketization' of culture and religion (USUNIER; STOLZ, 2014). And, repeatedly branded as 'capitalist' by its supporters, the project of neoliberal globalization is increasingly targeted by opponents.

There are many reasons, though, for questioning the notion that there is a separate sphere of the 'economy' apart from 'religion' and 'culture', 'politics' and the 'environment', or that there is a science of economics for understanding and managing 'it', or that GSJM struggles are only for a new 'economy'. Indeed, the rich history of GSJM movements confirms that much more is at stake in contemporary struggles over the future.¹⁵ In addition, there is a growing sense that restricting debates to the 'economy' is self-defeating for the left (DUGGAN, 2004). A quick glance at the evolving movement agendas confirms the increasingly broader, inclusive, and widely shared horizons and agendas: capitalist world-system, human rights, gender, environment, racism, health, indigenous rights, labor struggles, the rights of local communities, the rights to food and water, sustainable agriculture, alternative energy, LGBTQ rights, the rights of Mother Earth, cognitive justice...

At the heart of 21st century GSJM struggles it is becoming clear that, in the midst of information explosions and knowledge revolutions, new technologies, and expanding social architectures, less and less of life is God-given, natural, inevitable, and good, that more and more of life is shaped—and mis-shaped—by human agency. And these developments are contributing to the radical transformation of the contours and dynamics of life on earth, and the horizons of possible futures.

As in past crises, in the whirlwinds of global change it is possible to find data supporting wildly conflicting view of the overall course of this world historical

¹⁵ Lander refers to a "liberal cosmovision." (LANDER, 2003, p. 11).

transition and the future. Experts in a broad range of disciplines are projecting a growing range of divergent scenarios, which cluster around two main poles.

3.1 New Golden Era

At one pole, many experts point to great advances in the last two hundred years. Along with amazing developments in the production of goods and services accompanying technological/industrial revolutions since the 19th century, many point to signs of progress in meeting basic human needs. For example, the United Nations' Human Development Program recently reported:

The past 20 years have seen substantial progress in many aspects of human development. Most people today are healthier, live longer, are more educated and have more access to goods and service. Even in countries facing adverse economic conditions, people's health and education have greatly improved. And there has been progress not only in improving health and education and raising income, but also in expanding people's power to select leaders, influence public decisions and share knowledge.¹⁶

And all of this occurred in the midst of a great population explosion from 5 billion to 7 billion people! In their view, these successes fuel expanding visions of unprecedented levels of global economic growth and spreading prosperity—"a rising tide lifts all boats!" (SCHWARTZ; LEYDEN, 1997, p. 115-129). And for the first time in history it is possible to image the end of poverty. Indeed, at the dawn of the 3rd millennium at the United Nations, the world's leaders affirmed the Millennium Development goals of cutting world poverty in half by 2015, "reducing poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women." (MILLENNIUM PROJECT, 2000). As part of a campaign against poverty in over 100 countries around the world (GLOBAL, 2011), a campaign was launched to 'Make Poverty History' (MAKE, 2005).

¹⁶ UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME, 2010), p. 1.

As amazing as this would be, eliminating poverty is only the beginning. There are choruses of influential commentators pointing to a wonderful new techno-biological future. They are trumpeting advances in bio-technology, pharmaceuticals, information technologies, cognitive technologies, and human-machine interfaces, globally linked in a world brain. They are even heralding an enhanced humanity, a posthuman or transhuman successor species (GARREAU, 2005; KURZWEIL, GROSSMAN, 2009). Indeed, many see signs of this transition already, wondering if human nature has already become obsolete, if new and improved posthumanities are already emerging (HOOK, 2004, p. 36-40).

Indeed, some influential experts point to an even grander future. “By 2100,” a prominent physicist predicts, “our destiny is to become like the gods we once worshipped and feared.” We are, he proclaims, on the verge of being capable of manipulating objects with the power of our minds, seamlessly linking our minds to computers which will carry out our wishes, of creating “perfect bodies” and extending our life spans. Moreover, we will be creating new “life-forms that have never walked the surface of the earth,” and with nano-technologies creating new materials “seemingly almost out of nothing”. It is even possible now to anticipate harnessing “the limitless energy of the stars,” and, having already reached the moon, launching ships out into the distant heavens (KAKU, 2011, p. 10-11).

Some even imagine a truly cosmic role for humanity in the distant future, able to manipulate the basic laws of the universe, even the law of entropy leading to the seemingly inevitable ‘big crunch’. As a world-renowned leader in the development of artificial intelligence insists, “the fate of the Universe is a decision yet to be made, one which we will intelligently consider when the time is right” (KURZWEIL, 1999, p. 260).

These are grand visions of a wonderful new golden era. To the uninitiated they may sound like science fiction daydreams with no relevance for the real world. But in many political and cultural capitals these visions are woven with the mundane discourses of neoliberal economics and geopolitics in seamless tapestries

of progress in which humans become gods and heaven unfolds on earth. Moreover, officials in many government, corporate, and university offices are committing great sums to research and development projects along these lines. They are claiming many significant advances already, and calling for still greater investments, along with conversion of corporate and government priorities and education systems to accelerate this process (BOND et al, 2002, p. 25-27).

With reports in the news every day of breakthroughs in science and technology, it is difficult to imagine a future that is not deeply transformed by these cascading developments—especially among the middle and upper classes in the world, including the rising middle classes in the ‘Third World’, who benefit most from these developments.

3.2 Growing Chasms Between Rich and Poor

Such optimistic readings of modern history overlook the widespread turmoil, conflicts, environmental degradation, social crises, and wars also marking modern history. It is increasingly difficult to see history in the 21st century simply unfolding in a smooth, continuous, linear, harmonious manner. And there is another pole in contemporary debates about this world and possible other worlds.

First, there is a growing consensus that, compared to 1950s-1970s record, neoliberal globalization has been a failure even in its own terms, with slower growth, reduced progress on social indicators, increasing turmoil, recurring crises, like the 2008 financial meltdown, “one of civilization’s great seismic reversals.” (HEDGES, 2009).

More generally, while acknowledging the advances that have been made in some respects, for some people, in some places (including in some GSJM struggles!) there are growing reasons for disputing the rosy claims about the globally expanding middle class. Definitions of poverty lines are very problematic. There are controversies over how to define ‘poverty’, the reliability of the data, the frameworks for measuring it, and the formulas for weighing costs and benefits.

Moreover, increasing marketization of local communities often involves reduced access to basic necessities, less autonomy, alienation from the land and subsistence agriculture, disruption of the social supports of local communities, exposure to pollution, consumerist escalation of needs and desires, and rising costs in a market-oriented society (BROAD; CAVANAGH, 2012). Increased incomes often actually result in more impoverishment and insecurity, as non-market sources of food, services from relatives, neighbors and friends, etc. erode, driving people into markets requiring cash for an increasing range of necessities.¹⁷ And marketing and advertising—themselves massive and growing industries—are also continually creating new ‘needs’.

Moreover, much of the progress attributed to neoliberal globalization is accounted for by developments in China and India, whose governments did not follow neoliberal prescriptions, and is not generalizable to the rest of the world.¹⁸

And, more generally, skewed and unreliable accounting frameworks obscure so many costs which would tip the balance!¹⁹

In addition, extreme inequalities between rich and poor, with the massive concentration of wealth at the top, sharply skews the averages, with the vast majority of advances in health, well-being, and longevity accruing to those at the top. For example, even in the U.S., the widely-heralded ‘most affluent nation in history’, statistical claims to advances in life expectancy overlook the fact that the “increase is confined to the relatively well-off and well-educated [while] life expectancy is actually falling for a substantial part of the nation.” (KRUGMAN, 2012).

Meanwhile, at the same time that elites are cheering the indicators of rising new middle classes in many formerly poor nations, growing choruses of other voices are lamenting the deaths of the old middle classes, of increasing

¹⁷ More generally, as Christian notes, “for millions of people, modernity has led to worse living conditions.” (CHRISTIAN, 2005, p. 451).

¹⁸ For example, Piketty questions claims about great advances in China because of questionable data, and uncertain comparisons. (PIKETTY, 2014).

¹⁹ See WACKERNAGEL; REES, 1996; ROWE, 2013; ITALIAN Degrowth Network, 2008.

deindustrialization, devastation, abandonment of neighborhoods, and desolation.²⁰ Again, this is true even in affluent nations like the U.S. where economic uncertainty has become the fate of the great majority of people. Indeed, if seen over lifetimes, “four out of 5 U.S. adults struggle with joblessness, near-poverty or reliance on welfare for at least parts of their lives, a sign of deteriorating economic security and an elusive American dream.”²¹ What is startling about this picture is that, while peoples of color are still greatly over-represented among the poor, the great majority of whites too—76%—endure “periods of joblessness, life on welfare or near-poverty.”²² And in many places life expectancy is falling.²³ As the Occupy Wall Street movements helped to make so startlingly clear, the top ‘1%’ has accumulated virtually all the gains of economic growth in recent decades; and the gaps between rich and poor, within nations and between them, are greater than ever in human history, and rapidly expanding. It is also increasingly evident that such gaps are, even in conventional economic terms, bad, not only socially, but for economic growth in which consumer spending is pivotal; for indebtedness and poverty are shrinking the capacities of families and governments to purchase the hugely growing volume of goods and services made possible by new technologies of production and global commodity chains. In addition, “growing evidence shows that greater inequality brings with it more crime, worse public health and social ills that affect every tier of society.” (ELSE, 2012, p. 42).

As always, the poor suffer more in every respect, including their biological development, even the development of their brains (SEMENIUK, 2013), with profound effects on their learning capacities and skills throughout life, and reduced life-spans. These effects are intensified in environmentally racist patterns of development, with seeming inevitability weighing most heavily on the historically marginalized, peoples of color, women, and children.

²⁰ See CASSIDY, 1996, p. 11–13; SOLNIT, 2007; and I WYLIE-KELLERMANN, 2009.

²¹ Associated Press: “4 in 5 Americans Live in Danger of Falling Into Poverty, Joblessness,” *NBCNews.Com*, 29 July 2013.

²² Ibid. This decline of the old middle class is evident in Canada too; see CORAK, 2013.

²³ HENDERSON, 2013: “10 Ways America Has Come to Resemble a Banana Republic”.

So while knowledge is exploding and formal democracy is expanding, high walls and moats are being built around corporations and governments and their accountability is shrinking, and public debate is increasingly distorted and short-circuited. God-like powers are increasingly concentrated in the hands of small circles of elites.²⁴ And democracy (even where it has existed, in whatever limited and contradictory ways) is being strangled.

In the process, natural selection is being pushed aside by new processes of ‘unnatural selection’ driven by the profit motive in corporations selling progress in agriculture and health care (LOVINS, 2000). And ‘acts of God’ (the term of the insurance industry, and many ordinary people, to refer to what used to be called ‘natural disasters’) are giving way to ‘unnatural disasters’, reflecting unholy intermixtures of ‘natural’ and ‘human’ factors, like the hurricanes and typhoons and other instances of ‘extreme weather’ wreaking havoc with increasing frequency around the world (ABRAMOVITZ, 2001).

Science and technology promise no magical solutions. As the histories of marginalized peoples have confirmed throughout human history, new knowledge, technologies and scales of social organization are often appropriated by reigning elites and turned to their own ends. And the elixir of breakthroughs so often deafens them to cries of the victims, blinds elites to the consequences of their choices, and contributes to civilizational collapse (DIAMOND, 2005). And in the early years of the 21st century, growing choruses of critical voices paint increasingly apocalyptic visions, of increasing ecological-social turmoil, catastrophes, and ‘de-creation’ (McKIBBEN, 1999).

A partial list includes:

²⁴ As Buzan and Little point out: “a few have almost godlike powers to create and destroy on a planetary scale.” (BUZAN; LITTLE, 2000, p. 329).

- global pandemics suddenly killing millions, perhaps tens of millions of people, also unleashing widespread social turmoil, producing waves of fleeing refugees, and expanding turmoil regionally and globally;
- spreading militarism (led by the U.S. despite enormous costs in the quality of life for ordinary Americans, fiscal health, and the skewing of ongoing development), and the widespread pollution and ecological disruption directly associated with it;
- pushing numerous ecological limits beyond their tipping points: nitrogen and phosphorus cycles; ocean acidification; freshwater use; chemical pollution; atmospheric aerosol loading, three of which “have already transgressed their boundaries.” (ROCKSTRÖM et al, 2009, p. 472-475).
- intensifying biodiversity loss, accelerating rates of species extinctions, and local eco-system collapse;
- proliferating wars, especially resource wars over oil and water, intensified by chemical, biological, and small nuclear weapons;
- runaway biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, nanobiotechnologies²⁵ and/or artificial intelligence in robots (JOY, 2000) - (most likely triggered by corporations’ and governments’ reacting in panic to some climate change or other catastrophe, and launching an ill-conceived major project of geo-engineering—indeed, the first battles over geo-engineering are already being fought);
- enviro or energo-fascism, as governing elites mobilize support for their ever-more-radical actions, seeking to block critics and forestall decline of their power (KLARE, 2007);

²⁵ ETC Group, 2003: “Green Goo: Nanobiotechnology Comes Alive!”.

- cascading climatic cataclysms, generating widespread destruction and social turmoil, waves of refugees and immigrants, conflicts, and war (CAMPBELL, 2008).

Meanwhile, wealth and power become ever more concentrated. And the blindness of elites to the bad fruits of their own policies, and their deafness to the cries of their victims show no limit.

And the prospects of avoiding deepening social turmoil, eco-social catastrophes, and a 'war of global civilization' are growing dimmer (LANDER, 2007, p. 55). Each new report on climate change reveals previous reports were far too conservative, contributing to a deadly false optimism. Growing numbers of commentators, like James Lovelock, formulator of the Gaia hypothesis, are warning about the future of humanity: "before this century is over billions of us will die and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable" (LOVELOCK, 2006; STEWART, 2005, p. 15-28). And some prophets are crying out about the prospect of the extinction of the human species ('humanicide'), perhaps with cosmic implications if life is rare in the universe and consciousness even rarer, with God knows what implications for the evolution of the cosmos.

3.3 Another World Is Inevitable

So, in the midst of cascading waves of new knowledge, new technologies, new social architectures, and vastly expanding scales of human agency, there are two widely divergent and conflicting historical dynamics. Some groups anticipate wonderful new possibilities for themselves and their descendants, literally new heavens on earth. But this path is less and less generalizable, or sustainable. So many others confront new hells of suffering and death before their time. And thousands of insect, plant, amphibian, and animal species are disappearing in what is already the sixth mass extinction event in the history of life on earth (ELDREDGE, 2001).

We are witnessing the end of the world as we have known it. Amidst the clashing experiences and visions of possible futures around the world and across disciplines commentators are searching for appropriate analogies to grasp the magnitude of changes shaking the world: in civilizational terms comparable to the development of agriculture 10,000 years ago, or the inventions of civilization 5,000 years ago, or to the fall of the western Roman empire or other empires, or to the rise of colonial capitalist modernity with its accompanying devastation of ‘non-Western’ cultures and civilizations; in ecological terms ‘climate change’; in geological and evolutionary terms ‘epochal’, comparable to the transition marked by the extinction of dinosaurs 65 million years ago and the dawn of a new geological / evolutionary era.

In more ways than we can see, we are caught up in world historic processes of re-creating ourselves, our civilization, and (the rest of) nature, in nothing less than a “fierce struggle to re-create the world.” (SANTIAGO, 2004, p. xiv-xvi).

Conclusion

Ours is also a time of extraordinary religious efflorescence. This is not because Christians or members of other faith communities have the ‘answers’ to the questions confronting humankind, or because of the prominence of liberation theologies and of fundamentalisms in recent decades, though these are parts of story. Rather, more fundamentally, it is because the horizons of existence—of earth and the heavens above, of the God-given and the humanly-constructed, of body and spirit, of life and death, of reality and possibility—are shifting once again. The classic questions at the heart of religious and philosophical traditions concerning Cosmic Creativity, creation, human nature and destiny are being re-opened, and require urgent answers. In so many aspects of life, though, we confront severe limits of reliable knowledge. And there are no fundamental choices without leaps of hope and faith which contribute to tipping the balance among widely divergent possible futures.

In the midst of these whirlwinds, we are (re)discovering that our religious traditions have long histories of wrestling with the mysteries of creation and human nature, the contours of human freedom and responsibility, and the challenges of vast expansions of human agency accompanying knowledge breakthroughs and new scales of social organization (as in the creation of ‘civilization’). They have histories of wrestling with the seductive allure of wealth and power and prestige, the social/ecological costs of hubris among the powerful, the eternal challenges of distinguishing between false hopes for the few and inclusive hopes for the many and for the Earth, between blind arrogant faith announcing universal truths abstracted from practice and humble always-questioning faith incarnated and tested in practice.

These traditions also offer many stories of apocalypse, of worlds ending,²⁶ of navigating through end times and into new beginnings. And they offer deep wisdom, challenges, and inspiration as we navigate the shoals of world historical transitions, striving for deep faith which alone can sustain our hopes for “a world where all worlds fit.”²⁷

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²⁶ As indigenous author John Mohawk has pointed out concerning a Hopi myth of civilizational death and rebirth: “This story should be thought of not as a fantasy but as a collective memory. The archaeological and geological records show that past civilizations did exist in the desert Southwest, they did decline and disappear, and the people did re-emerge. The story is true.” (MOHAWK, 2006).

²⁷ GENERAL Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation–Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, 2001.

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