

# Ecology, spirituality and the sustainability of the global community of life

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## Introduction

In this chapter I wish to share my vision of the global community of life and its present state, which is quite unsustainable. I raise questions on what can be learned from this situation and what we need to know in order to change our behaviour and lifestyles in such a way that the community of life can live in harmony. What can we learn from the historic development of our own culture, religion and sciences? And what can we learn from other cultures, religions and sciences? Intracultural and intercultural learning could contribute to the necessary change in worldviews, and endogenous development could enhance these processes of learning and change.

## Taking position

I grew up in a liberal Christian environment in The Netherlands. My parents stimulated me to enjoy and respect nature. My scientific training in land development and soil and water conservation increased my interest in the interaction between human society and nature. Several spiritual experiences opened my eyes to the importance of the spiritual dimension of life. Interactions with people from other cultures, among others in the context of the COMPAS programme, helped me to develop a worldview in which there is more space for spirituality than in my earlier secular liberal Christian worldview.

Cultures and the worldviews on which they are based change over time (see for example, Armstrong, 2005). Apparently human beings do not know the absolute truth and learn to find their way through time. Knowledge and how people come to knowing are culture specific. Views of individual persons, science and religion, therefore are not absolute but coloured by subjectivity and culture. This does not matter as long as we are aware of it and make use of the wide diversity of worldviews and knowledge of other persons, cultures and religions to expand our understanding of reality. Therefore, accept also my worldview as one of the many subjective views on life. Maybe it provides some small rays of light to help us find our way to more sustainable worlds. But, maybe I still have more questions than answers.

## We and spirituality

In my worldview, just as in many traditional worldviews, all living beings, we included, have material, social and spiritual dimensions. Our bodies are material and we relate in social ways to other members of our species and their wider biophysical environment. All living beings together and their physical environment form the interactive global community of life or the global ecosystem.

Of the spiritual dimension of life, I know far less than of the material dimension. Most people believe in divine beings (or forces): God, gods, mother earth, ancestors, the unborn, spirits, demons and so on, but also other living and non-living beings are seen to have a spiritual dimension. Personally I am not so outspoken on the name or shape of these divine beings and spiritual dimensions. To me, what they represent, the Essence of Life, is more important. Interaction with the spiritual dimension of life can teach us about the Essence of Life, the essence of each individual human being, the human species, the global community of life and of the entire cosmos. Personally, I am just in the kindergarten of spiritual learning and therefore am happy that there are also other ways to understand life.

## Different ways of knowing

Mythical and religious stories and other spiritual revelations aim to give insight in the divine world and the meaning and ideal orchestration (ethics) of human life. Each culture has (received? or created?) its own sacred stories to provide unity and common direction to its society. Religions brought sacred books that intended to replace the sacred stories of individual cultures, uniting them in a larger family.

By direct observation and logical reasoning we can learn a lot about the biophysical world, the functioning of the global ecosystem and human behaviour. By contemplation and meditation, among others, we can communicate with the spiritual world and come to internal knowing, intuitively or by grace, about life and its messages to us.

These different ways of knowing about reality are quite complementary and give us the opportunity to get insights in the different dimensions of life, their how and why. Each culture gives different importance to these different ways of knowing. Their opinion on the different ways of knowing can change over time. For example, in western culture, the Christian church, through its sacred book the Bible, has controlled the interpretation of reality for long time. Enlightenment brought more freedom and space for scientific and economic interpretations of reality, but spiritual and material knowing were separated. Presently religious knowing, scientific knowing and economic knowing have further lost their cohesion and are seen as more or less independent visions on reality. Each vision got its own domain, in daily life it is the economic vision that became dominant. Intuitive spiritual knowing (gnosis) has been strongly discouraged by church and science as it does not accept their authority and power position.

The unique ways of how people express their culture in space and time, their lifestyle and how they shape their livelihoods, not only depend on the specificities of

the biophysical resources they have access to but also on their sacred stories, the relative value that is being given to each way of knowing (dominated by religious dogma, scientific insights or economic liberty), and the knowledge gained and practiced in their journey through time.

Globally seen this may largely explain the wide cultural diversity and the unique biological diversity that has resulted from these cultural evolution processes. The biodiversity created by cultures (bio-cultural diversity) is an important contribution to the local and global natural biodiversity. It is one of the indicators that provide information on the knowledge situation of the local community and its culture.

## We are part of the global ecosystem

In my view, human beings are part of nature, whatever special capacities we may have. This means that we are part of the global ecosystem. By how we are shaping our lives we are influencing many of the other entities of the ecosystem and the complex interactions between them. By acting in a different way than expected by the system (than designed by God?), we are disturbing the functioning of the system, which, to a greater or lesser degree, is getting out of balance. This is triggering many reactions from other entities and processes of the ecosystem which, in their turn, are creating again many other actions and reactions and eventually are affecting our own lives and behaviour.

Normally the ecosystem is in dynamic balance. Disturbances can be temporarily born at the cost of specific organisms, but these normally recover after some time. When the ecosystem gets too disturbed, it gets out of balance for a longer time at the cost of many more organisms, who may not succeed in recovering and as species may disappear for ever. Due to our present lifestyles this is actually happening. The global ecosystem is getting more and more out of its dynamic balance, and many species of living organisms are seriously threatened or have already disappeared. Even mankind itself is being affected, among others by pollution, climate destabilization, changes in behaviour of pests and diseases, deteriorating landscapes and loss of biodiversity. Biodiversity is an important indicator of ecosystem functioning, its resilience and sustainability. As bio-cultural diversity provides an important contribution to biodiversity in general, local bio-cultural diversity is an important indicator for the functioning of local culture. Loss of bio-cultural diversity is an indicator of the loss of functional quality of a local society and its culture; as people cannot survive within a degraded ecosystem. Globally seen, the loss of cultural and bio-cultural diversity are indicators of the malfunctioning of the global society.

## Cultural diversity threatened

There are still more than 8,000 distinct cultures and 6,000 languages in the world. Cultural diversity as human heritage is extremely important for global humanity as it stands, not only for ecological diversity but also for diversity in our ways of knowing, knowledge and wisdom. This diversity, among others, complements our visions on

the different dimensions of life and our knowledge on how to live sustainable lives in specific environments. It is therefore enormously important for the resilience and sustainability of all humanity and the global ecosystem of which we are part. Besides, cultural diversity is an immensely rich source of beauty, joy and inspiration. It expresses our celebration of life and our respect to our creator(s).

Cultural diversity, however, is increasingly being threatened. Globally there is repression of minority cultures by more dominant cultures and religions. Most of the indigenous and tribal peoples have lost large parts of their territories, are seriously being discriminated against and forced to abandon their traditional practices. Many languages of minority cultures are under threat or have ceased to exist. Intolerance of cultures, religions, knowledges and practices that differ from the main culture, religion or sciences is an important reason for this. Globalization of material scientific knowing, the free market economy and the consumer culture that benefits the relatively rich half of the world's population, and the poverty of the relatively poor half, are reinforcing this trend.

Apparently there is a strong relation between loss of ecological sustainability and loss of cultural diversity. The ample availability of fossil energy and fossil energy-driven technology is making it possible to satisfy our needs and greeds without taking the ecological and social limitations into account. Or, in other words, we celebrate economic liberty that we cannot afford both ecologically and socially.

But what do we really know about how societies and the community of life can live in a sustainable and peaceful way on our common earth? There clearly remains a lack of understanding of the functioning of the local and global ecosystem, the strong interdependence of all members of the community of life and the need for biological and cultural diversity.

## What about the essence of life?

In my view, our common goal in life is to create a prospering global community of life that is socially just, peaceful, ecologically sustainable, diverse and beautiful. My spiritual intuition even tells me that this is the essence of human life. Creation of unity, harmony and beauty is not only showing the highest respect and love for the divine world but also to all human and other living and non-living beings in our world.

How can we learn from the present polycrisis to improve our lifestyles in such a way that they are a better expression of our essence? What has really contributed to the present situation here in the west and elsewhere? Did the liberation from religious domination and social control lead to the limitless individuality and economic liberty we presently have?

Did the separation of scientific knowing from religious and spiritual knowing result in loss of ethical norms on how to use technical knowledge for economic purposes? Are we students of scientific witchcraft who do not understand the whole system and do not know the right tricks yet?

If we had valued our religious and spiritual knowledge more and had maintained a better balance between religious, spiritual and scientific knowing, what would have happened? Would we have respected biological, cultural and religious diversity?

## What can we learn from other cultures, religions and sciences?

Probably we can learn a lot from analysing the historic evolution of our own culture, religion and science. But this may not provide all the answers we need. A lot also can be learned from the historic evolution of other cultures and their religions and sciences. What do they see to be the essence of life? How do they try to achieve this objective, with what results? How did they cope with social, ecological and spiritual crisis? When and how did they or did they not find the knowledge and wisdom to stay in harmony, socially as well as ecologically and spiritually? What do they know about how to create livelihoods in balance with nature? What advice do they want to give to western and other societies? This immediately shows the value of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue.

Also other cultures are affected by the western crisis of knowing what is right and what is wrong. For example, the benefits of modern fossil energy-based technology are very attractive for nearly all people in the world, to accumulate wealth and consumer goods as well as to alleviate poverty. But do they know what is ecologically, socially or spiritually affordable? All cultures therefore have to find their own answers to the question of how to deal with modernization and globalization. How do we combine traditional and modern knowledge in such a way that the own cultural identity is not affected, the basic needs of everybody are satisfied and well-being and sustainability are optimized?

## Endogenous development and COMPAS

Endogenous development, development from within the own culture based on intracultural and intercultural and interscientific learning, research and collaboration therefore may be very helpful to find solutions to the present global polycrisis. COMPAS is one of the intercultural networks that is aiming at this objective.

### Reference

Armstrong, K. (2005) *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, Knopf, New York.