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As all the readers of this magazine are well aware, the fossil fuel-dependent, over-consuming culture in which we are currently living is unsustainable in the long term. But how will it come to an end? A bang, a whimper, or...what? Many people expect a bang, despite the fact that forecasts of apocalypse rarely come true. Others cling to the hope that some new technology will save the day, even though it usually doesn't. But maybe neither of these scenarios will come to pass. Maybe we can expect what author and Archdruid John Michael Greer calls a 'long descent' into a post-industrial future in which, slowly and often painfully, we re-learn the skills we need to survive as a species on this planet.

Greer has for many years been writing a thoughtful, insightful and well-researched blog about the shape he believes this post-industrial future might take and the societal trends that he sees influencing it. One of the trends he expects to emerge is a spiritual one. Rationality and self-reflection have ruled our intellectual lives since Descartes identified existence with the thinking mind. God has been pronounced dead. But if you are a careful student of historical patterns, as Greer is, then you might well surmise that some version of God is due to re-emerge and in fact the signs may already be there. Greer thinks they are.

The Second Religiosity

JOHN MICHAEL GREER



The first and broadest reason for the difficulty is that the overall shape of a civilization's history may be determined by laws of historical change, but the details are not. It was as certain as anything can be that some nation or other was going to replace Britain as global superpower when the British Empire ran itself into the ground in the early twentieth century. That it turned out to be the United States, though, was the result of chains of

The normal aftermath of an age of reason is a return to religion – in Spengler's terms, a Second Religiosity – as the only effective bulwark against the nihilistic spiral set in motion by the barbarism of reflection. Yes, I'm aware that that's a controversial claim, not least because so many devout believers in the contemporary cult of progress insist so loudly on seeing all religions but theirs as so many outworn relics of the superstitious past. This is a common sentiment among rationalists in every civilization, especially in the twilight years of ages of reason, and it tends to remain popular right up until the Second Religiosity goes mainstream and leaves the rationalists sitting in the dust wondering what happened.

I'd like to suggest that we're on the brink of a similar transformation in the modern industrial world. The question that comes first to many minds when that suggestion gets made, though, is what religion or religions are most likely to provide the frame around which a contemporary Second Religiosity will take shape. It's a reasonable question, but for several reasons it's remarkably hard to answer.

happenstance and choices of individual people going back to the eighteenth century if not further. If Britain had conciliated the American colonists before 1776, for example, as it later did in Australia and elsewhere, what is now the United States would have remained an agrarian colony dependent on British industry, there would have been no American industrial and military colossus to come to Britain's rescue in 1917 and 1942, and we would all quite likely be speaking German today as we prepared to celebrate the birthday of Emperor Wilhelm VI.

In the same way, that some religion will become the focus of the Second Religiosity in any particular culture is a given; which religion it will be, though, is a matter of happenstance and the choices of individuals. It's possible that an astute Roman with a sufficiently keen historical sense could have looked over the failing rationalisms of his world in the second century CE and guessed that one or another religion from what we call the Middle East would be most likely to replace the traditional cults of the Roman gods, but which one? Guessing that would, I think, have been

beyond anyone's powers; had the Emperor Julian lived long enough to complete his religious counterrevolution, for that matter, a resurgent Paganism might have become the vehicle for the Roman Second Religiosity, and Constantine might have had no more influence on later religious history than his predecessor Heliogabalus.

The religious sensibility fading out around us has for its cornerstone the insistence that humanity stands apart from nature and deserves some better world than the one in which we find ourselves. The pervasive biophobia of that sensibility, its obsession with imagery of rising up from the earth's surface, and most of its other features unfold from a basic conviction that, to borrow a phrase from one currently popular denomination of progress worshippers, humanity is only temporarily "stuck on this rock" – the "rock" in question, of course, being the living Earth in all her beauty and grandeur – and will be heading for something bigger, better, and a good deal less biological just as soon as God or technology or some other allegedly beneficent power gets around to rescuing us.

This is exactly what the rising religious sensibility of our age rejects. More and more often these days I encounter people for whom "this rock" is not a prison, a place of exile, a cradle, or even a home, but the whole of which human beings are an inextricable part. These people aren't looking for salvation, at least in the sense that word has been given in the religious sensibility of the last two millennia or so, and which was adopted from that sensibility by the theist and civil religions of the Western world during that time; they are not pounding on the doors of the human condition, trying to get out, or consoling themselves with the belief that sooner or later someone or something is going to rescue them from the supposedly horrible burden of having bodies that pass through the extraordinary journey of ripening toward death that we call life.

They are seeking, many of these people. They are not satisfied with who they are or how they relate to the cosmos, and so they have needs that a religion can meet, but what they are seeking is wholeness within a greater whole, a sense of connection and community that embraces not only other people but the entire universe around them, and the creative power or powers that move through that universe and sustain its being and theirs. Many of them are comfortable with their own mortality and at ease with what Christian theologians call humanity's "creaturely status," the finite and dependent nature of our existence; what troubles them is not the inevitability of death or the reality of limits, but a lack of felt connection with the cosmos and with the whole systems that sustain their lives.

I suspect that this rising sensibility is one of the factors that made the recent movie *Gravity* so wildly popular. The entire plot of the film centers on Sandra Bullock's struggle to escape from the lifeless and lethal vacuum of space and find a way back to the one place in the solar system where human beings actually belong. To judge by the emails and letters I receive and the conversations I have, that's a struggle with which many people in today's industrial world can readily identify. The void scattered with sharp-edged debris they sense around them is more metaphorical than the one Bullock's character has to face, but it's no less real for that.

Can the traditions of the current religious mainstream or its established rivals speak to such people? Yes, though it's going to take some significant rethinking of habitual language and practice to shake off the legacies of the old religious sensibility and find ways to address the needs and possibilities of the new one. It's entirely possible that one or another denomination of Christianity might do that. It's at least as possible that one or another denomination of Buddhism, the most solidly established of the current crop of imported faiths, could do it instead. Still, the jury's still out.

Adapted, with permission, from a much longer piece entitled 'At The Closing of an Age' in *The Archdruid Report*, November 27, 2013: thearchdruidreport.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/at-closing-of-age.html

John Michael Greer is the Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America (www.aoda.org) and the author of more than thirty books on a wide range of subjects, including peak oil and the future of industrial society. He lives with his wife Sara in Cumberland, MD, USA, an old red brick mill town in the north central Appalachians. His blog, *The Archdruid Report* (<http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.co.uk/>) has several thousand followers.

