

The Spirit of the Commons

Jim Kenney

When seen from outer space, our beautiful blue planet has no national boundaries.

— H.H. the Dalai Lama

Long ago, the ‘commons’ simply meant the place we villagers shared and the resources of which we all partook. Here we pastured our small flocks, gathered herbs and mushrooms, and hunted game. And we were protected by an unspoken and unwritten understanding. No individual or group could draw down the resources of the commons to the detriment of the community. It was a simple but binding covenant.

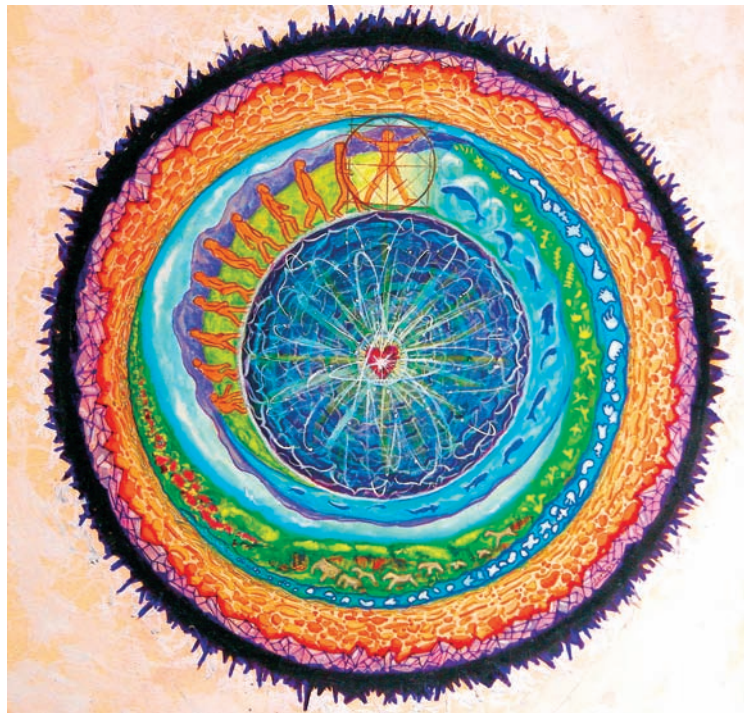
Inevitably, perhaps, wealth and power intruded. What had long been regarded as a basic right of ‘the people’ began to be eroded by the process of ‘enclosure’ as first kings and then modern nation-states claimed the commons for their own use. From the manor house on the hill came the decree that the village commons was to be walled off, that the forest was to become a preserve, and that ancient rights no longer prevailed. One can, for example, trace the history of British law against the backdrop of the enclosure movement and the diminishment of the commons. On the other hand, however, it’s now possible to discern—as a counterpoint to the long, sad tale of enclosure—the emergence of a modern paradigm of cultural evolution.

Today a new virtual community is taking shape. Its goal is the definition, declaration, and defense of the *global commons*—the shared physical, economic, cultural, and spiritual heritage of humankind. While the concept may yet be largely unfamiliar to many, it has most certainly arrived. The awarding of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences to political economist Elinor Ostrom was a clarion call for born-again ‘commoners’ everywhere. Her demonstration that communities can indeed sustainably share common resources was a powerful rejoinder to the naysayers who have long insisted that selfishness must always

triumph over communalism and lead to the ‘tragedy of the commons.’

The 21st century reawakening of the dream of the commons ranks with the discovery of the New World. It befuddles the old order and energizes the new, celebrating humanity’s evolutionary leap toward ‘the adjacent possible.’ As evolutionary visionary Steven Johnson puts it: “The adjacent possible is a kind of shadow future,

hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which the present can reinvent itself.” In the struggle to identify and preserve the global commons, we’re witnessing that process of cultural and spiritual reinvention at work. The new human engagement with the commons is already one of the most persuasive indicators that we have entered an age of powerful and progressive culture shift, of the evolutionary movement of humankind’s dominant values toward a closer fit with reality.



evolving homage to Teilhard

Sea Change—Culture Evolves

The overarching question of our age might be phrased like this: “Do cultures evolve or do they merely change?” In other words, are cultural evolutionary arguments and theories responsible and reasonable, or do they represent wishful but inadequate thinking? The argument for positive, progressive cultural-evolutionary change can, in fact, be presented in a straightforward way. In my book on cultural evolution, *Thriving in the Crosscurrent: Clarity and Hope In a Time of Cultural Sea Change*, I offer this image:

At the most dramatic moments of the evolution of human culture, two waves intersect. One is powerful but subsiding, the other just gathering momentum and presence but not yet cresting. At the moment of their meeting they are nearly equal in amplitude and influence. Now imagine modernity as a powerful wave of cultural values that crested half a century ago and is slowly beginning to subside. At the same time, a second wave of countervailing

values rises equally slowly, building until its crest begins to rival the declining energy of the older wave. In Western culture the modern wave has long been dominant. Deeply rooted in classical antiquity and European history, the modern wave has profoundly shaped every culture in the world. In our own time, however, we have begun to sense the weakening of its influence and to recognize the growing strength of a challenging newer value wave. This younger wave represents positive change. It is the wave of future possibility in the present, the advent of a cultural evolutionary transformation.

We're living in a critical transformative period. It's characterized by a steady decline in influence of some of our most familiar assumptions, values, and models for understanding. We've come increasingly to question and challenge patriarchy, the legitimacy of war, ecological exploitation and pollution, racially-based policies, injustice, religious exclusivism, and imperialism. At the same time, we've begun to explore newer or rediscovered values including human rights, social justice, ecological sustainability, care for the Earth, non-violence, and interreligious harmony.

In a time of pronounced evolutionary transformation—sea change, several factors converge. The first is the decline of the older wave with its preferential embrace of patriarchy and the structures of wealth and power. The second is the rise of the newer wave, embodying nonviolence and peace, social and economic justice and human rights and ecological sanity and sustainability. Clearly, the crossing of the declining older wave and the rising newer wave has given rise to a cultural value complex in which the cause of the global commons can rise and prosper.

The evolutionary dynamic has, however, a third aspect: the inevitability of turbulence in the period of the intersection of the falling and rising waves. Simply put, the dynamics of a period of accelerated cultural evolution are challenging. The eddies of resistance—from fundamentalism to fascism—are transient but threatening. Still, there's good news for those who champion the global commons as the iconic struggle of the new wave. Our evolutionary passage has a distinctly spiritual character. And it helps.

A Second Axial Age?

Students of human cultural evolution often cite the Axial Age (the first millennium BCE) as one of the great sea changes in human history, an exemplary period of progressive value shift. This remarkable turning of the world's spiritual axis shaped a new focus on the individual in the place of the tribe, nurtured the emergence of human ethical sensibility, and kindled the first flickers of the spiritual search. It brought the dawn of the great classical religious traditions.

As the late theologian Ewert Cousins described it:

The Axial Period ushered in a radically new form of consciousness. Whereas primal consciousness was tribal,

Axial consciousness was individual. "Know thyself" became the watchword of Greece; the Upanishads identified the atman, the transcendent center of the self. The Buddha charted the way of individual enlightenment; the Jewish prophets awakened individual moral responsibility. This sense of individual identity, as distinct from the tribe and from nature, is the most characteristic mark of Axial consciousness.

Two millennia later, our twenty-first-century sea change is ushering in its own 'great transformation,' which Cousins and others have described as a Second Axial Period. Our own axial turning is simply the cultural evolutionary sea change viewed from a religious or spiritual perspective. Arguably the most important change underway in our time is the transformation of the perceived truths that shape our most essential attitudes and choices. In the First Axial Period, individual consciousness emerged, allowing people to distinguish themselves from a purely tribal identity. The Second Axial Age nurtures a new global consciousness. We are still individually centered, but we are beginning to recognize our roles as global beings, inexorably intertwined with each other and with the Earth community.

The great religions today continue to be guided in large measure by the vision of First Axial founders and communities. For the most part, Second Axial values do not depart in any major ways from those foundational insights and teachings. Instead, they call us back to our roots even as they point the way ahead. Most important is the transition from exclusivism (complete denial of the truth of the other) toward inclusivism (acknowledgment of the possibility that the other's truth may be an acceptable subset or variant of one's own superior truth) toward pluralism (openness to the possibility that religious truth, as symbolic expression, may be found in many cultures and traditions). Moreover, religion and spirituality in the current crossing are increasingly engaged with the great issues of the age: nonviolence and the building of cultures of peace, the nurturing of economic and social justice and human rights, and honoring and preserving the Earth and all her life systems. The ideal of the global commons is 'second axial' to its core.

Clearly then, the modern dialogue about the global commons might be enriched by the admixture of a spiritual perspective. That's the view of James B. Quilligan, a frequent contributor to this journal and one of the pioneers of the global commons movement. Observing that the movement has not thus far engendered its own spiritual dimension and that many activists might in fact be resistant to such a development, Quilligan nonetheless sounds a strong positive note.

There is a huge divide between the natural commons and the social commons. The development of a 'spiritual commons' might be a way of bridging that gap, flowing as it does from the realm of human intersubjectivity. Here, a deep appreciation of nature and beauty comes together

with profound insight into art, compassion, justice, and ecology. We need to recapture this interdisciplinary balance in public policy and in every aspect of our vision and our struggle.

The Peace Council—Spirituality and the Commons

In 1995, an extraordinary organization was born. Inspired by the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, the Peace Council brought together some of the world's most engaging, articulate and committed spiritual leaders in an unprecedented experiment. Their purpose was to embody shared spiritual and ethical principles and to act on them. Members included His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and many other revered leaders from the world's great traditions. Peace Councilors have traveled the world to areas of dispute, conflict, and violence in the hope that their presence might make a constructive difference.

In 2010, the Peace Council agreed to bring its moral authority to bear on some of the most critical issues of our time, giving expression to convergent views and encouraging constructive action. The very first global theme chosen by Peace Councilors and Trustees was the global commons.

We affirm that the great religious and spiritual traditions of the world, entering a new age of global interdependence, have a particular responsibility to participate in the identification and definition of elements of the global commons and to commit their energies to the creation of new understanding and new action that will safeguard the global commons for our own peoples and for the generations to come. The cherishing of the sacred Earth and of the richest fruits of human cultural endeavor is a spiritual calling and a sacred duty.

Fr. Thomas Keating, the Trappist spiritual teacher who works tirelessly to share the contemplative technique of 'centering prayer,' spoke for the Council about the spiritual nature of the task of cherishing the global commons.

The Divine penetrates all of creation and moves it and we are allowed to co-create the future with God. We have the intelligence and the Divine expects us to do so within the perimeters of some of the great insights of the world religions regarding morality especially that surrounds justice, equal rights for everyone, and respect for the earth. This is what human beings should be doing! I mean that's our revolutionary destiny and duty.

The Council has spoken out, for example, on what may be the most evocative of all manifestations of the global commons: the water that occupies most of our planet surface and which has nevertheless become one of the most coveted human resources.

right Jim Kenney (far right) with Iranian and Israeli spiritual leaders at Dialogue of Civilizations gathering, Barcelona.

photography | cetta kenney



Peace Councilors and friends at Summit on Global Justice, NYC 2005

Is water a privilege? If so, only those able to purchase it may drink. But if water is a right, then it must be protected as a common good, a good for all.

When international agribusiness conglomerates threaten water and seed 'commons,' the world's religious and spiritual communities must respond. This is a basic issue of human and planetary justice.

The Peace Council and countless other religious and spiritual communities, groups, and NGOs frame the struggle for the commons in a very old and very new way. Their spiritual vision is centered on the creation and promotion of cultures of peace. In contrast to warrior cultures, peace cultures choose mutualism over adversarialism. Evolutionary thinkers committed to the cultivation of communities of peace stress its complex interdependence with justice and ecological sustainability. Remove any leg from the peace-justice-sustainability tripod, and the others can no longer support the weight of a society.

In this spirit, the late Elise Boulding, the great Quaker peace activist and a long-time member of the Peace Council, used to say,

Peace cultures thrive on and are nourished by visions of how things might be, in a world where sharing and caring are part of the accepted lifeways for everyone.

Perhaps the time has come for a new synergy of spirituality with peace, justice, and ecological sustainability...in the spirit of the commons.

Jim Kenney is the Executive Director of the Interreligious Engagement Project (IEP21), working with global religious communities to address the world's critical problems through cooperative partnerships with government, business, education, media, intergovernmental organizations and civil society. Jim is also the Executive Director of Common Ground, serves as Co-Editor of *Interreligious Insight: a Journal of Dialogue and Engagement* and is Project Coordinator for the International Interreligious Peace Council. A founding trustee of the Parliament of the World's Religions and its Global Director from 1996-2002, he is the author of *Thriving in the Crosscurrent: Clarity and Hope In a Time of Cultural Sea Change* (Quest Books: May 2010).

