

Planning and Managing the Ideal Society: Commitment and Conflict

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Professor of International Studies Chukyo University Richard Harris

The idea of a single, perfect society of all mankind must be internally self-contradictory, because the Valhalla of the Germans is necessarily different from the ideal of a future life of the French, because the paradise of the Muslims is not that of Jews or Christians, because a society in which a Frenchman would attain to harmonious fulfilment is a society to which a German might prove suffocating

Isaiah Berlin

Any more or less harmonious society can be said to share a core set of values, and these values are expressed, albeit obliquely, in the salient myths of the society and in many aspects of its communication behaviours. In this sense, the term myth refers not to a spurious folk tale or legend, but rather to a kind of cultural metaphor in which the underlying, tacit assumptions of a community are set forth in a narrative that does not rely on logical consistency for its truth or power.

Of these foundational myths, one of the most ubiquitous and enduring genres is that of the ideal society, or paradise. Whether located in a mythic past, as a symbol of former perfection, or posited as a future state to be anticipated or striven toward, such visions

have an often unacknowledged, possibly subliminal influence on perceptions of present social reality, potential futures, and patterns of communication.

An examination of paradise myths can therefore furnish valuable information as to the images of social perfection held by different cultural groups, and could also clarify the hidden biases and aspirations that may impede communication across these cultural boundaries. In this paper, I shall present a model for using paradise myths to identify the distinctive features of different cultures in terms of their visions of the ideal society. The framework for the study is a six-part analysis, or typology, of the different categories of paradise myths according to their dominant emphases or orientations. Of course, such a model cannot be completely comprehensive; a culture may exhibit different myths belonging to more than one category, and many individual myths are too complex to be unequivocally assigned to any one classification. This approach nevertheless yields important insights into a culture's prevailing values, with crucial implications for its concept of social harmony.

For the purposes of this study, I have considered separate paradise myths as belonging principally to one of six major categories that I have termed Arcadian, Utopian, Millenarian, Hesperidean, Elysian and Olympian, the names referring somewhat arbitrarily to their exemplars in Classical Greek or Judeo-Christian myth.

By Arcadian, I am referring to paradise conceived as an ideal community located in the distant past, either historical or mythical, and now irrevocably lost. Many societies, for example, have a Golden Age to which the present is explicitly or implicitly compared, and this concept is commonly manifested in everyday communication in the form of metaphors, proverbs and allusions. The Utopian paradise, conversely, is a vision of a future state, an achievable, harmonious society that can be built on the base of the present through the disciplined application of human effort and will. (Eaton, 2002; Scafi, 2006) Clearly derived from culturally conditioned definitions of the good, Utopian visions can of course easily be seen as Dystopias from other cultural perspectives (Berlin, 1991). Distinct from this concept yet still located in the future is the Millenarian paradise, which is a perfect society that will inevitably come about, not through human endeavour, but by divine or some other supernatural intervention, or by evolution. Compared to the Utopian, it is a more fatalistic, or passive vision of human social perfectibility, an outlook again reflected in communicative patterns.

My fourth category refers to a concept of paradise that belongs neither to the future nor the past, but somehow physically exists eternally in the present, yet is either lost or extremely difficult to reach. I have termed this vision Hesperidean, after the beautiful lost islands of Greek myth, and the concept

has been a powerful influence on migratory cultures, where the grass is always thought to be greener across the next mountain range. In none of the categories so far described has there been any explicit mention of survival beyond human death, so I have used the term Elysian for those varieties of paradise that emphasise an ideal society as an afterlife, accessible only after mortal existence is over and possibly outside the realm of the temporal. Finally, the term Olympian refers to an idea of paradise as the home of the gods, generally off limits to humans. Descriptions of such divine habitats can yield significant clues as to the values of a society exhibiting this kind of myth.

As mentioned above, this is not an exhaustive categorisation, nor are the categories completely discrete or even mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the approach is highly practical in that it does facilitate an investigation of paradise myths and their communicative implications from cultures separated in both time and space. By exposing the dominant emphases of important cultural myths in this way, and showing how these emphases or values are reflected in communication behaviours, a deeper understanding of the core assumptions of a culture can be obtained, which is an essential step in achieving, or even striving for, the harmonious society.

The Arcadian Aspect

Deriving its name from an agricultural region of the Greek Peloponnese, Arcadia has come to stand for a lost age of peace and plenty, and the nostalgia felt for this vanished stage of perfection, real or imaginary, has been a major inspiration for human thought and endeavour for thousands of

years. In the west, the most influential version of the Arcadian vision has been the Christian Garden of Eden, itself based on the earlier Sumerian myth of Dilmun. No written records exist prior to Sumerian cuneiform, of course, and the origin of the Sumerians is unknown, but it is possible, as Richard Heinberg suggests, that Dilmun represents "an idealized description of their former home." (Heinberg, 1989) Strikingly similar myths are found in the geographically contiguous and near-contemporary Egyptian and Iranian cultures, all characterised by visions of abundance and lack of strife.

While the above correspondences may plausibly be explained by Frobenius-like theories of cultural diffusion, it is remarkable that similar myths can be found in widely separated areas of the world, suggesting that the Arcadian impulse is potentially a universal one. The Mayans of Central America, the Samoans of the Pacific, the Hopi of the southwestern United States, the Greeks of Hesiod's time, and ancient Chinese Taoist stories all remember ideal societies of their distant past. An intriguing question, of course, is to what extent these myths are based on distorted cultural memories of actual former states, although their historical reality or otherwise need not detract from their ongoing social influence.

A recent example of the power of the Arcadian myth to inspire visions of the perfect society can be found in the ecofeminist writings of Riane Eisler (Eisler, 1988), who bases her speculations on the work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (Campbell & Musès, 1991). From her excavations in southeastern Europe and Crete, Gimbutas concluded that Old Europe society from the beginning of the Neolithic period was a peaceful, agrarian,

earth goddess-worshipping civilisation that was violently displaced around 3000 BCE by Indo-European pastoralists venerating fierce male sky-gods – the forebears of Odin, Jehovah and Zeus. Eisler further argues that many paradisaic myths, such as those of Atlantis and Eden, are in fact based on folk memories of the Neolithic, a time of social harmony and gender equality. Such everyday English phrases as "back to the garden" and "before the Fall" thus acquire social resonance as well as mythic allusion.

Yearning for the past also informs the strongly Arcadian perspective on childhood, observable in many societies at many times, especially in the form of imaginative literature and poetry. Seen as innocent and closer to nature than adults, children are not subject to the pressures of work, responsibilities, and decisions; little noble savages, they inhabit an ideal world of instinct and freedom forever closed to their parents. Not only is childhood generalised in this way, people tend to idealise their own childhoods. Reality, of course, is not the point; as David Lowenthal has written, "we know intellectually that the past was not like that. Children, however, live more vividly and so, as adults, unable to experience so intensely, we mourn a lost immediacy that makes the past unmatchable... We shed tears for the landscape we find no longer what it was, what we thought it was, or what we hoped it would be." (Lowenthal, 1985)

Psychologically, the sentiment that underpins all Arcadias is the nostalgic; a yearning, often unconscious, for a lost time of happiness, innocence and content. The Arcadian impulse is behind the quotidian banality of expressions such as "things are not what they used to be in the good old days," but also inspires the creation of art, from the erudite

heights of Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the ephemeral banalities of this week's pop song. Many people derive a curious satisfaction from visiting relics either of their own past or the past in general, a satisfaction not entirely explicable by intellectual curiosity alone. Social planning of any kind is likely to contain some element of the Arcadian, no matter how future-oriented the intention; identifying the source of the idealist impulse, however, may prove elusive.

The Utopian Aspect

The term Utopia was first coined by the English Catholic Thomas More in 1516, who constructed the word from Greek roots, deliberately suspending the meaning between those of *outopia* (no place) and *eutopia* (good place). The literary genre of descriptions of a perfect society had existed for some two thousand years in Europe, but the adjective Utopian has since come to be applied to both speculative fiction and idealist political planning. In contradistinction to the Arcadian aspect, however, the emphasis in Utopian writing is very much on the future perfectibility of society rather than on past glories; while it may be based on a mythic vision, the Utopian aspiration is essentially an optimistic, forward-oriented, humanist one. "Because they grow from desire and fear, utopias cry out for our sympathy and attention, however impractical or unlikely they may appear." (Carey, 1999)

Another characteristic feature of the Utopian, is that it is a politically activist mode, serving as a criticism of present conditions. In his study of 20th century Utopian movements, historian Jay Winter has noted that "a utopian vision arises out of a moral indictment of a set of institutions or beliefs which

have been corrupted." (Winter, 2006) Since such criticisms are value judgments, however, they are both culturally conditioned and individually determined, leading to a wide range of imaginable societies that fall "somewhere along a spectrum that stretches from ascetic to hedonistic" (Roszak, 1993). A Utopian vision therefore inevitably invites conflict since, while purporting to be inclusive of all humanity, it nevertheless excludes all those who do not share its basic premises. More's Utopia seems singularly unappealing to most modern liberal readers: a highly-regulated, static, slave society where infringements are punishable by imprisonment or death; where fashions never change; where family size is strictly controlled; and where privacy is unknown.

Notwithstanding its less pleasant features, More's contribution had enormous impact on political thought and discussion. People began to question whether injustice and poverty were indeed part of the divine plan, or were rather the consequences of human fallibility. "Perhaps the application of reason and ingenuity might make it possible to create, if not Paradise, at least a new social order in which everyone would be better off." (Heinberg, 1989) In succeeding centuries a host of Utopian theorists advanced new prescriptions for social perfection, some of which became blueprints for actual social experiments. For J.V. Andrae it was true religion, while for Tommaso Campanella (and his 20th century intellectual descendants) it was eugenics. Francis Bacon thought that technology was the answer, while Samuel Gott advocated a revolution in education. Closer to the present day have been the Communist Utopia of Marx and Lenin, the Socialist Utopia of William Morris, B.F. Skinner's behaviourist paradise in *Walden Two*, and

several versions of ideal societies with environmentalist or ecofeminist emphases. Practical attempts to construct Utopias include the Israeli kibbutz movement and the counterculture Communes of the United States, as well as, less benignly, large scale social engineering projects such as Mao's China, the Soviet Union, and Pol Pot's Cambodia. These are the pernicious visions condemned by Kevin Rushby, when he writes of "our headlong rush towards that mythical, and unreachable, destination." (Rushby, 2006)

The Utopian aspect, then, refers to a potential social or political paradise based on the idealist vision of one person, or one group of people, equating to an ideology. It is very much a product of its time; succeeding generations can all too easily see the naivety or impracticality of such visions, and contemporary critics can parody or exaggerate Utopian characteristics as Dystopias. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are classics of this genre, both savage indictments of the prevailing social tendencies of centralised state control and division of labour.

Contemporary debates over such issues as sustainable development, environmental protection, political integration, human rights, and immigration policy are all, at root, differences in Utopian conceptions of the ideal society and how to achieve it. Potentially dangerous for the ideological passion they can inspire in their adherents, such aspirational differences can nevertheless lead to creative dialogue and social progress. Like the Arcadian myths on which so many Utopian visions are based, however, such convictions must be identified and acknowledged in a spirit of openness and cooperation. "Utopias force us to face the fact that we do not live there; we live here, and we cannot but use

the language of the here and now in all our imaginings." (Winter, 2006)

The Millenarian Aspect

The Millenarian paradise resembles the Utopian in its temporal orientation, in that both perspectives look to the future as opposed to an Arcadian past. The Millenarian, however, is distinguished from the Utopian in its relatively passive expectation of an ideal future; rather than something to be striven for, the creation of the perfect society is a divinely preordained event, essentially beyond human control. Espousal of this world view, prevalent in a large proportion of the U.S. population, according to many surveys, can imply an alarmingly fatalistic, short-term attitude to the possibility of planning for the future. In the 1980s President Reagan's nominee for Secretary of the Interior, a department charged with managing the U.S. National Park system, was James Watt, an outspoken critic of the environmental lobby. Asked at his confirmation hearing how he intended to preserve the environment for future generations, Watt blithely replied that he did not know "how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." (Boyer, 1992) His appointment was confirmed.

In many Millenarian myths, the appearance or return of a messianic figure inaugurates, and sometimes presides over, the time of earthly paradise, usually preceded by an apocalyptic catastrophe. Watt's version, reported above, refers explicitly to the second coming of Jesus, but this mythic motif is by no means restricted to Christianity. Countless 'sleeping hero' legends from all over the world tell of a figure, divine or human, historical or otherwise, who has passed from

the world of humanity yet somehow waits, under the earth, beneath the sea, or in the sky, for a time of crisis, when he or she will return to defeat the forces of evil and usher in a new golden age of peace and plenty. King Arthur, Charlemagne, and the Emperor Frederick are typical European examples; Gluskap of the Algonquins and Quetzalcoatl are representative of the Americas; Tamerlaine the Great and the Japanese Buddhist monk Kobo Daishi are their Asian counterparts.

Although humans are generally incapable of affecting either the onset or the nature of the Millennium, they are nevertheless free to interpret ancient writings as prophesies of the coming apocalypse, and to see terrestrial and cosmic events as signs and portents. (Cohn, 1993) Far from being a private set of beliefs, such convictions have significant real-world consequences. In the west, the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition, with its roots in the Middle East, has influenced a number of politicians in their interpretation of events in that region. President Reagan famously opined that "fire and brimstone will be rained upon the enemies of God's people. That must mean that they'll be destroyed by nuclear weapons." (Boyer, 1992) In the same vein, President George W. Bush, along with many prominent televangelists, has also frequently alluded to what they see as the multiplying signs of the coming Armageddon, with various candidates, from Saddam Hussein through Yasser Arafat to Osama bin Laden, cast in the role of Antichrist. Clearly, the historian of religion Jean Delumeau was premature in his optimistic assertion that "the disappearance of the earthly paradise also meant the disappearance of the repulsive image of a vengeful God." (Delumeau, 1995)

In comparison with the essentially optimistic, positive outlook of the Utopian vision, the Millenarian is characterised by a kind of selective fatalism, in which all events are made to conform to a preordained plan leading to a definitive end of everything. Although secular liberals will tend to see this perspective as a gloomily passive, highly negative worldview, its adherents often seem to derive a certain relish from their smug contemplation of the coming end. The early Christian church father Tertullian sardonically predicted that one of the pleasures of the earthly paradise would be the view of sinners roasting eternally in the fires of hell. Subscribers to this kind of view are the people whom Harold Bloom, in his book on American religion, has called "the good haters whom D.H. Lawrence feared, the lovers of apocalypse for its own sake." (Bloom, 1992) In part, this attitude can be ascribed to a confidence on the part of Millenarians that they are among the chosen, the ones who will survive the apocalypse and live on in the earthly paradise, while those who do not share their particular set of views on individual morality, behaviour, and social arrangements, the damned, will either be obliterated or suffer eternal torment. Whatever the validity or otherwise of such convictions, the implications for social planning and communication are immense.

The Hesperidean Aspect

The three conceptions of paradise considered so far have all been at a temporal remove from the present: the Arcadian belongs to the past; the Utopian and Millenarian in the future. The term Hesperidean, however, taken from the lovely Garden of the Hesperides in Classical myth, refers to a

paradise that is thought to exist now; though the route may be difficult, or the exact location lost, it is nevertheless thought to be potentially accessible and worth striving for. If the dominant mood of the Arcadian is one of yearning, and that of the Millenarian one of acquiescence, the Hesperidean shares with the utopian an essentially optimistic, humanist perspective. At its most basic, it is the actively questing spirit that is convinced of the existence of a better place and a more satisfying life somewhere over the next ridge, where the grass is greener. At a mythic level, it may be the impulse for the great voyages of discovery, both in antiquity and the Renaissance; the driving force behind migratory and pioneering enterprises; and the urge to push beyond the earth into space.

An intriguing variant on the Hesperidean theme is found in cultures believing that the world they currently inhabit is an ideal one. Kirkpatrick Sale, in his book on the European discovery of the Americas, fittingly entitled *The Conquest of Paradise*, describes a common theme of Amerindian myths "as one not of Paradise Lost but of Paradise Now; in effect, of peoples having ascended from a dark Other World, a world of sorrow and evil, into the present Edenic garden" (Sale, 1990). The threat to this perceived idyllic existence posed by outsiders may not be immediately apparent many indigenes have welcomed explorers and invaders with remarkable generosity but the inevitable disruption of the social order has almost always led to fear and opposition. Similar attitudes can be discerned in the exclusionary reaction of many contemporary societies to immigration, either legislatively or physically, in the form of gated communities or border fences, a theme that will be explored

again below, in considering the Olympian paradise.

More conventionally though, the inspirational force of the Hesperidean idea has been rooted in the conviction that somewhere exists that is better and can, with effort, luck, or divine guidance, be found. Mythic models include the Celtic Isle of Avalon and Tir na n-Og, the land of perpetual youth; Shambhala (or Shangri-La), the hidden Tibetan paradise; and the Chinese Kingdom of Hua Hsu, where inhabitants are "without desires or cravings, following natural instincts in perfect harmony." (R. Harris, 1996) Historically, the idea can be identified in the promised land of the Hebrews, in both ancient scripture and in 20th century Zionism; it is the land of boundless opportunity that America represented for migrants in the 19th century; it is Thoreau's Walden, Stevenson's Samoa, and Gaugin's Tahiti, as well as the mystical destinations of Varanasi or Kathmandu for the hippy pilgrims of the 1960s. Currently it is the European Union for migrants from North Africa and Eastern Europe, and all over the world it has driven dispossessed farmers to seek better lives in urban centres. The right of some people to search for paradise, however perceived, is inevitably going to be in conflict with the right of others to protect it.

A final subset of the Hesperidean aspect is that of the inner search for paradise, the conviction that an apprehension of paradise may be attained by means of an altered consciousness, by journeying within, and attaining a different mode of perception. Traditionally, the two main methods for conducting this search have been what may be termed the transcendental and the pharmacological. Meditation techniques from every time and place, Buddhist, Yogic, Shamanic, Christian

mystic, or secular, all share the goal of achieving inner peace and tranquility, defining characteristics of paradise. The transcendental meditation school, for instance, speaks of attaining what it calls the unified field, "an integrated, harmonious state of perfect order and all possibilities." (Harrison, 1990) With similar aims, the use of psychotropic substances in the transformation of consciousness has also been a feature of a large number of traditions, from the Vedic ritual of ingesting soma to the 20th century experiments of Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary. For Terence McKenna, in his historical study of such practices, the underlying conviction is the same: "Paradise is our birthright and can be claimed by any one of us." (McKenna, 1992)

The Elysian Aspect

I use the term Elysian to refer to myths conceiving of paradise as a joyous afterlife, a destination or an experience on the far side of mortality. Human beliefs about death exhibit an impressive variety, from total physical and psychic extinction, as in secular humanism, through rather one-dimensional visions such as Valhalla, the everlasting party of drinking, feasting and fighting imagined by ancient Norse culture, to the subtle ideas of transcendence found in Buddhist doctrine. The crucial feature of paradise, though, is that it is a conditional concept; admission is contingent on having lived according to a set of religiously mandated expectations.

Judging from archaeological evidence obtained from burial sites, a concern with death and survival of some sort beyond death has been central to most religious systems from at least the Neolithic up to now. Many

thinkers, Freud notable among them, have even located the origins of religion itself in the human preoccupation with death and possible continuance. In early European, Jewish, and Chinese myths, however, there are few references to either bliss or torment, of the "compensatory afterlife" (Bowker, 1993) that would become such an important feature of later eschatologies. Homer's disconsolate dead inhabit a gloomy, insubstantial location comparable to the contemporary Hebrew Sheol; not a destination to be sought or eagerly anticipated by the living.

The contemporary exception to the affectless afterlife is to be found in the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, where tomb inscriptions from the third millennium BCE attest to a clear link between earthly behaviour and post-mortem reward in a paradise envisaged as a more comfortable version of life on earth. "Ancient Egyptian religious ideas are notoriously complex," writes Geddes MacGregor, "but the concept of judgment is pervasive." (MacGregor, 1992). It is difficult to trace the influence of these Egyptian ideas on neighbouring cultures, but there are clear correspondences in subsequent myths of the Iranians, Hebrews and Greeks that certainly suggest diffusion. Whatever the source, the concepts of judgment and a conditional paradise were to become central to all the major religions, with repercussions of particular import today.

The precise nature of the promised paradise obviously varies widely with culture, but is always seen as preferable in some way to existence in the present. Three main emphases can be identified. First, reincarnation systems as in Hinduism hold out the prospect of rebirth in the present world, but in an enhanced physical or social form. Second, in what might be termed the transcendental

vision, as found in much Christian theology or the Buddhist nirvana, paradise is a somewhat disembodied state in which the soul knows infinite joy through the direct contemplation of, or fellowship with, a divinity, or the cosmos itself. And finally, there is the sensual vision of a physical paradise in which earthly pleasures are available in greater quality and quantity than in the believer's present existence.

Since admission to paradise is considered desirable on the part of believers, and yet is conditional on having lived according to the precepts of the religion in question, such precepts clearly have tremendous motivational force. Interpretation, however, is the key. Few religious commandments are so unambiguous as to be accepted without question by all in the community, and disputes often result in serious internecine conflict, even leading to schism. The commandment not to kill, for example, is highly contingent on circumstance; war and legal execution are perfectly acceptable to many believers. Secularists can have similar disagreements over such issues as human rights, of course, but for religious believers the consequences of incorrect behaviour — an eternity in, or excluded from, paradise — are so momentous that the emotional commitment to an espoused doctrine may be far greater.

The prospect of an Elysian paradise makes it easier for humans to contemplate death, perhaps especially when conditions in this life are seen or experienced as miserable. When religious sanction is given, therefore, to a course of action that brings about one's own, or another's, death, then what might otherwise be unthinkable becomes not only acceptable, but mandatory. From the Neolithic to the present day, martyrs, zealots, proselytisers and crusaders have left a

depressing record of death and destruction. Belief in Elysium, in many respects so optimistic a vision, is terrifyingly easy to pervert.

The Olympian Aspect

Olympus, in Classical myth, was the mountaintop home of the twelve major deities of the Greek pantheon. Generally inaccessible to mortals, it represented to the Greeks a luxurious realm of perfect climate and plentiful food — clearly bearing no relation to conditions on top of the physical Mount Olympus. Mountains, however, have often thought to be appropriate dwelling places for gods; Shiva's palace is on top of Mount Kailas, the Hopi Kachinas inhabit the San Francisco mountains, and the Norse Asgard is yet another example. No doubt the very inaccessibility of mountains contributes in part to their being identified as divine locations, but it is also notable that, for many cultures, the home of the gods is in the sky, as in the Christian heaven, suggesting a relationship between elevation and status. English expressions such as moving up in the world or reaching for the sky perhaps also partake of this unconscious equation of excellence and altitude; a literal superiority.

Although it shares with the Hesperidean paradise the characteristic of being eternally present, there is an important difference between these two aspects of the ideal. A crucial feature of the Olympian paradise is its exclusivity; it is a place for the gods alone, with (in some myths) occasional exceptions made for favoured humans such as shamans or heroes. There are countless tales in myriad cultures of humans punished for their hubris in attempting either to reach the home of the gods or to emulate its pleasures

too closely. Sacred buildings on earth are often constructed to include an area that echoes this motif of separation, a *sanctum sanctorum* for the exclusive use of the gods or spirits, and perhaps their priestly representatives.

On first consideration, Olympian conceptions of paradise may seem to have less direct influence on human behaviour than the five aspects described above. The theme of exclusivity (or, more pejoratively, exclusion), however, has been a constant in human history, Olympian visions possibly serving as inspiration or reinforcement for such separation. Gated communities, clubs or societies with restrictive entry policies, and attitudes to immigration are all expressions of a sense of exclusiveness, a feeling, in mythic terms, of being separate from and to some extent more worthy or godlike than those excluded. As mentioned above, elevation tends to augment these perceptions of superiority; the physical location of a ridgetop house or a penthouse apartment enables its occupant literally to look down on those below, and carries the metaphorical message of being higher on the food chain, or the great chain of being; closer, in fact, to the gods.

Olympian exclusionary attitudes are found in almost all religious institutions, irrespective of the otherwise prevailing concept of paradise. Notoriously, separation on the basis of gender is both widespread and enduring. The Buddha was reluctant to permit women into the order, and there are no female Buddhist clergy, the Catholic church still refuses to ordain women, no woman is allowed onto the Greek peninsula of Mount Athos, reserved for Orthodox monastic orders, and many Asian holy mountains, such as Mount Omine, in Japan, are off limits to females. Such discrimination is mystifying,

but may indeed be connected to the theories of Riane Eisler, mentioned above, concerning the gradual superceding in post-Neolithic times of a matriarchal, fertility-centred religion by a paternalistic, warrior god culture.

The potential for conflict between cultures espousing Olympian, exclusionary values and others with more egalitarian visions of attainable paradises, such as the Hesperidean, is massive. When the British were colonising New Zealand in the 19th century, they unknowingly (or uncaringly) entered lands traditionally believed by the Maoris to be the homes for spirits. In order to appease the offended spirits' wrath, the Maoris therefore felt obliged to kill the intruders. Today, sacred sites or holy mountains all around the world are inevitably being trespassed upon by others not sharing the same values, and the lack of dialogue can have tragic consequences. Osama bin Laden's greatest grievance against the United States was the polluting presence of infidel U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest shrines.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the six categories of paradise myth delineated above are not intended to represent a comprehensive model entirely free of internal contradictions. The Christian heaven clearly exhibits both Elysian and Olympian features, for example, and some cultural visions of paradise, such as the Dreamtime of the Australian Aborigines, are so subtle and ambiguous as to resist categorisation altogether. Nevertheless, the model does enable consideration of the salient emphases and values of cultural systems, as expressed in their dominant

myths.

In its original Greek sense, *mythos* referred to things that were profoundly, eternally true, as opposed to the contingent human narrative of *epos* or the rationalist, legalistic mode of *logos*. Myth is a language of emotion and allusion, a metaphoric, poetic mode of symbols and images, resisting definition and embracing plurality, yet somehow perfectly suited to the expression of deeper aspects of the human condition. Around the 6th century BCE, however, *logos* became the dominant means of cognition and expression, a development with profound consequences for human history, given the globalising influence of the Hellenised west on the rest of the world over the succeeding centuries. As the psychologist Luigi Zoja writes, "the birth of *logos* contained the whole of the future course of western culture: monotheism, scientific theory, the legal definition of the powers of the state and the accumulability of all knowledge require it as a premise." (Zoja, 1995)

In contemporary usage, myth is often contrasted unfavourably with this starkly reductionist discourse, its meaning having acquired the pejorative connotation of something not logical, or even untrue, as in phrases such as 'ten myths about immigration' or 'the myth of flying saucers'. The value of myth as a vital mode of expression for the sacred, for the elusive fundamentals of human existence, has been all but forgotten. In common with most other human activities therefore, social planning is usually considered logically, conducted in the language of *logos*, the hard-edged, denotative language of precision and fixed meaning, and while this permits scientific accuracy, it necessarily excludes vital aspects of human experience. Without consideration of a culture's

myths, it is difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate the origins, longevity, and power of that culture's values, an understanding of which is essential to making any development decisions.

The myth of paradise is perhaps particularly influential in social planning, since it has a clear secular counterpart as a vision or model of the ideal society. Physical descriptions of paradise in myth yield valuable clues as to a culture's idea of the perfect environment, built or natural, just as depictions of relations between humans and their deities, or of the separation of chosen and damned, suggest cultural views or assumptions regarding hierarchy and equality. A conception of paradise as irretrievably lost may encourage nostalgia, dissatisfaction, and passivity; on the other hand imagining paradise as an achievable future state can inspire ruthless ideologies, while believing a future paradise to be inevitable can breed complacency. The fact that the roots for such attitudes are often unacknowledged in no way diminishes their power to affect behaviour.

In their more recognisable, open forms of religious doctrine, many recent writers have condemned the ideological potential of competing visions of paradise (Dawkins, 2006; S. Harris, 2005; Hitchens, 2007), but fewer have appreciated their importance as mythic, hidden inspirations for thought and action. At this level, the myth of paradise represents a connected set of fundamental, ontological convictions as to what human beings are, how they should treat each other, and how they should live on the earth. Only when such convictions are acknowledged, examined, and openly debated can true social progress be made.

In a recent book, Paul Hawken examines the contemporary movements for social

justice and environmental protection, religious and secular, and concludes that they are in fact expressions of the same human truth: "The way we harm the earth affects all people, and how we treat one another is reflected in how we treat the earth." (Hawken, 2007) Such could be the foundational text for a new approach to imagining paradise.

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