

# Global Warming Calls For An Inner Climate Change

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## *Climate change and the collective consciousness*

There's something fascinating going on. While environmental campaigners have been sounding the alarm over climate change for decades, the danger has suddenly also sunk home to the wider public. All at once, the climate is a hot topic, at the forefront of common concern. No trendwatcher had foreseen the speed of this collective change in awareness.

The shift can partly be attributed to the perfect timing of Al Gore's documentary: the 'inconvenient truth' we saw on the cinema screen was directly and tangibly perceptible in our own surroundings; first, with winter practically passing us by, and next with the summer that came much too soon. In addition we're seeing a considerable economic upsurge - which generally spurs a heightened awareness of environmental issues - and

another confrontation with the unreliability and political volatility of our current energy sources.

This 'climate fad' has prompted a change of course with respect to energy that runs counter to the political tendencies of recent years. It's a remarkable development that clearly illustrates the critical significance of the collective consciousness: as long as the general public does not perceive climate change as urgent, there will be no support for efforts toward a solution.

The majority of citizens, incidentally, look toward technology for a solution. This 'technological optimism' may well be treated with some scepticism, however. For one, new technologies do not just materialise out of thin air. Aside from creativity, the development and implementation of new technologies requires political commitment and hence broad-based support. Moreover, recent years have shown that technological advances are often overtaken by other (demographic, economic, cultural) developments. Cars, for instance, have become more economical over the years, but at the same time we've started driving more kilometres and buying bigger cars. And even if the market starts producing highly energy-efficient cars, will consumers actually flock to buy them? Will people be willing to buy a car several sizes smaller than their own social stature? The current climate debate generally focuses on new technology and renewable energy, with a footnote here and there on behavioural change and governance. Yet however important all these aspects are, a truly effective climate policy calls above all for an internal climate change, that is, a transformation of the collective consciousness. This consciousness, after all, is the foundation underlying (the support for) all measures to be taken and all policy to be pursued. It is what every politician knows all too well: the power of the people is immense.

If we wish today's concern over climate change to prove more than just a fad, prone to dissipate as quickly as it developed, we have to dig a little deeper into ourselves to understand what this crisis reveals about ourselves, our relationship to the world and our

lifestyle. Since decades, environmental philosophers agree that the environmental issue is more than just the waste product of our industrial-technological civilisation. They say it's a symptom of a much deeper crisis, reaching all the way to the very roots of our western weltanschauung.

### *The rational-scientific world view*

According to this frequently criticised world view, only that which is empirically perceptible has genuine validity. Internal phenomena are reduced to their external equivalents; consciousness is a by-product of the brains and the experience of love is attributed to chemical processes. This materialistic interpretation of the world has yielded vast insight into the physical aspect of existence; but it also tends to devalue the world into an object, a consumption article, a tool. Nature, in this view, is not only 'value-free' but also value-less'. Lewis Mumford introduced the term 'disqualified universe', since this world contains quantity, but no real quality.

In addition and as a result, this concept of reality results in a fundamental separation between man and nature, mind and body, subject and object. In a world in which matter is ultimate reality, everything is fundamentally divorced: physical boundaries are insurmountable. The rational human being stands diametrically opposed to irrational nature. The body is reduced to just a vehicle for the mind. Facts are utterly separate from values. To conclude: the modern western individual is estranged and removed from nature - and not just from the nature around him, but also from the nature within himself. As Jürgen Habermas puts it: "the permanent sign of Enlightenment is dominance over an objectified external nature and a repressed internal nature."

That this world view has a bearing on the climate issue need hardly be argued. A world view that denies all interiority necessarily produces an extremely exteriorised culture. From such a materialistic philosophy of life, the quest for happiness can hardly lead anywhere but the shopping mall. And precisely this incessant consumption culture is

difficult to reconcile with responsible policy and conduct with respect to the environment. This world view is sometimes considered a 'faith' because, just as conventional religion, it carries a promise of happiness, even some kind of salvation. It conceals an ideology that appeals powerfully to fundamental human needs, desires and convictions. This world view is therefore often seen as the main obstacle to a transition to a sustainable society. Unfortunately, it is far from easy to change such deeply entrenched, often subconscious beliefs and ideas.

Metaphysical revolutions - that is, a transformation of the world view held by the general public and therefore constitutive of the economy, politics, habits and morals of a community - are rare occurrences in the history of mankind. Such transformations tend to stretch across several centuries and generally engender widespread social antagonism. For example, during the transition from the Aristotelian-Christian to the rational scientific world view, precursors and pioneers paid dearly for their visionary views, sometimes even with their life. We need only to mention scientists such as Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler and Bruno, branded heretics on account of their heliocentric theories and subjected to heavy punishment as a result.

World views tend to evolve unchecked into their logical extremes. The only thing that can alter their course is a world view that is patently superior; a new model that does provide answers to the challenges of the time, and that thereby renders the older model obsolete. In other words, a world view needs to be overtaken by the dramas of that age. And that is, by and large, precisely what we see happening today.

### *Spiritual nomads*

Our late-modern society is bursting at the seams of the materialistic world view. A paradigmatic shift is swelling to the surface in many different areas. We see this in the ever-growing quest for meaning and quality of life, for profundity and authenticity, for personal growth and moral commitment. The popularity of yoga, for instance, is indicative of a desire to integrate body and mind. The increasing appreciation for the

'primal awareness' of agrarian life reveals a longing for intimacy with nature. According to the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, many citizens have become "spiritual nomads", quenching their spiritual thirst at various springs encountered in the course of their life, from a course in meditation to Bach's Matthäus Passion.

It is clear that the western model, with its excessive material wealth and infinite freedom of choice, has not been able to satisfy the individual's existential needs, nor to create the social cohesion sought by every society. As noted by the latest Dutch government coalition agreement, "Affluence does not equal well-being. Social security does not equal social cohesion". These needs prompt a range of responses, often in the realm of personal growth, spirituality and the search for meaning.

The American philosopher Ken Wilber distinguishes between "pre-rational" and "post-rational" forms of spirituality. Where the first form is characterised by magical images and romantic idealisations, the "post-rational" variant evolves through the development of capacities that, in terms of psychological development, lie beyond rational thought, yet remain firmly founded on that basis. This form of spirituality is a logical next step in human evolution, in which the individual strives to tap into a deeper layer of his human faculties; for example, a deep inner serenity, a capacity for creative and integrated thought, genuine empathy and sympathy, authenticity and integrity. These qualities are increasingly being voiced and, apparently, collectively sought, yet thus far they largely lack (scientific) articulation.

As long as reason remains sufficiently reasonable to recognise its own limitations, this spirituality is not at all *contra rationem*, in conflict with rational thought. In fact, the intellectual elaboration and linguistic articulation of this domain is crucially important to furthering its development. For, to quote Wittgenstein, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Moreover, being somewhat nebulous by nature, this realm of reality is not well served by vague verbosity.

This movement is more than just a marginal undercurrent; in our culture as a whole we are seeing developments that appeal to a different concept of reality and a different understanding of what it means to be human. In the scientific world, the boundaries of positivism are increasingly lamented and transgressed. In philosophy, the age-old questions of life are back on the agenda and 'the art of living' is enjoying a veritable renaissance. Daily language is increasingly infused with psychological insight. The business sector is embracing practices such as meditation and personal growth, because these contribute to employees' creativity and hence to the productivity of the firm. An economy is emerging in which the prime natural resource is no longer land or capital, but the human being and his work, his network, knowledge, creativity and power of thought. Despite these developments, spirituality is still somewhat burdened by negative connotations. For many people, it is akin to hocus pocus, irrationality and regression (that is, the "pre-rational" variant in Wilber's terms). And indeed, society has had its share of bad experiences with people claiming to speak in the name of God and unscrupulously abusing their position. The concept of spirituality is deeply tainted by so-called gurus that smooth-talked their disciples into bed and by wayward individuals who considered the emotional whims of their 'inner child' to outweigh the sovereignty of another. For many impassioned atheists, spirituality reeks of a return to something from which our culture only just managed to liberate itself, with much pain and effort. Yet the nature and scope of the developments described above demonstrate that our ideas on spirituality require an update. The concept seems to have overcome its infancy and is now seeking its shape and role in the mature world.

The central principle of post-rational spirituality is that the spiritual or the 'divine' is manifested in and as life itself, and is thus not restricted to the afterlife or a creator that transcends its own creation. Evolution and creation do not rule each other out, but are like two sides of the same coin: evolution is a continuous process of creation, and creation is taking place in the form of evolution. Everything is animated, and the difference between man and nature is gradual rather than absolute. The human being is a 'co-creator', a *Lebenskünstler* (artist of life) that - if trained, developed, cultivated - possesses

faculties and potency much greater than we generally suppose. This potential engenders a vast range of possibilities as well as serious responsibilities. The entire world, all of nature, life itself, regains its intrinsic value and significance. And research has shown that this philosophy of life generally inspires a deep sense of environmental concern - which is of course critical to all aspects of climate policy.

Almost everyone will have (had) access to this dimension, in moments of bliss, perhaps on reaching a mountain peak and gazing down on wondrous landscape, or in an intimate moment with our loved one, or when enraptured by art or music. We suddenly feel light and joyful, open and generous to all and everything around, or we find our thought processes informed by uncommon clarity. Our life swells with a feeling of sense and significance. The best in us is aroused, and qualities that barely impinge on our daily life suddenly erupt through the surface. It are often intensely sensuous experiences: the intimacy with our own body, with another person or with the world around seems entirely natural, as if the boundaries between us have dissolved or become porous. However remarkable and perhaps exceptional such moments may be, they funnily enough cause us to feel more at one with ourselves. Everything seems more spontaneous and immediate; we coincide with our own nature. For some, such moments prove decisive in starting to make other choices in life; for example, to start devoting oneself, heart and soul, to matters that they truly consider worthwhile. In this respect, such 'peak', 'flow', 'top', 'mystical' or 'sublime' experiences contribute incomparably to one's values and personal development.

As hope-giving as this development may be, it is still a cultural undercurrent that is largely overrun by other social trends, and therefore still largely ignored by the mainstream of media, politics and science. If the potential for change harboured by this movement is to consolidate, articulation - preferably including scientific articulation - of this emerging world view is essential.

## *Science and truth*

Now that we have managed to chart the material world with so much intelligence and precision, from the minute level of superstrings to the massive levels of superclusters, a knowledge gap of an entirely different order is gaping at the heart of our society. There is a growing thirst for subjective knowledge, for experience and perception. There is a need to understand the inner universe of the individual. Values and norms are the subject of lively debate, and increasingly people are exploring forms of inner development. Recent research suggests that some two-thirds of the Dutch population engages in prayer: not so much in the traditional form of addressing God, but as a form of meditative self-reflection, a psycho-technique aimed at restoring one's inner balance.

However, this internal experiential world cannot be understood, described and 'proven' within the parameters of current (positivistic) science. The wiser among scientists acknowledge that there are legitimate forms of knowledge other than the rational-scientific form, chief amongst them art and philosophy. Besides seeing, that is, the world of objective perception and the aloof cerebellum, there is also being: the world of subjective experience and the responsive heart. But the world as revealed through the latter approach is generally kept strictly separate from the world discovered and described by naturalistic science. This results in the absurd situation that we are presented with two different realities. This not only splits the world in two, but also ourselves: the human as a knowing subject and the human as an object of knowledge are relegated to two seemingly irreconcilable scientific spheres.

Philosophers of science have a huge task cut out for them here. For just suppose that the new paradigm and the experiences of myriads of people contain a core of truth: that a spiritual or inner dimension informs all life on earth. Since this presence cannot be measured empirically or rationally proven, this dimension slips through the meshes of our scientific network of truth. According to the current rules we can formulate statements



on how people (apparently) experience this dimension, but we cannot say a word about the reality of this dimension. Objective knowledge is empirical-rational; subjective knowledge is a socio-psychological construct.

As long as we continue to deny the reality of that inner world - which so many of us experience in our more lucid moments - how can we expect people to seek orientation or self-development in this domain? How can we reproach people for seeking salvation in consumerism and materialism, in appearances and hedonism? For sure, to enjoy life is wonderful and there is deep beauty in the physical world. But this joy or pleasure becomes ephemeral if we persist in denying the reality of this inner experiential world, if it is disregarded instead of cultivated - for in the end, it is only here that we can experience love, perceive value, sense compassion and can connect to ourselves, to others and to nature, and discover joy and happiness.

This raises the following question, both epistemological and methodical: how can we study this experiential world objectively without objectifying it? How can we bring being within the scope of seeing? And how can seeing bring us closer to being? Phenomenology and hermeneutics, as well as various contemplative, mystical and spiritual traditions, can lend a hand here. To offer one example: 2500 years ago, the Buddha taught that it is truth that makes us free and 'enlightened', and Buddhism is replete with practices of genuine introspection and inner objectivity. But as long as we cling to that self-imposed roof on our reality - obscuring our view of the infinite starry expanse above - the new world view, and as a result the new world, will fail to materialise.

### *Climate change: a blessing in disguise?*

A 'metaphysical transformation' is a painful, difficult and very slow process. Some measure of external pressure to overcome the social resistance provoked by this process is therefore not unwelcome. Climate change - the drama of our time - may well play a key role and thus actually prove to be, despite all the misery and dangers, a blessing in

disguise. For its omnipresence and inevitability necessitate that radical revolution in how we think and act. Respect for nature, for the wonderful world in which we live and for all the inner and outer wealth bequeathed to us, can apparently only be instilled by a stern teacher. Climate change will thus hopefully help the course of history along, propelling the human race forward in that complex but gratifying process of growth and development, of blossoming into full maturity.

As Al Gore noted back in 1992, in his book *Earth in the Balance*: "The more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for the lack of a better word, spiritual." Annick de Witt is an associate of Stichting wAarde (Earth Value Foundation), a Netherlands think tank within the nature and environmental movement. Author of several publications, she has performed extensive research into the relationship between spiritual value-orientations and environmental responsibility.