

## The TMT: My Inner Battleground

The legal battle between Hawaiian religious claims to the undeveloped lands around the summit of Maunakea and the aspirations of a global community of astronomers to push back the limits of scientific understanding is about to be resolved. In this service, Bill Scarvie will explore his inner conflict over the Thirty Meter Telescope and apparently divergent views of the sacred. He asks, "Can we keep our feet on the ground while reaching for the stars?"

## Opening Words

(hokulea.com)

Embedded in the story of Hōkūleʻa and the culture that created her is the story of a 2000-year-old relationship with special islands and the sea. It is a story that was almost lost, and was close to extinction. But ultimately it is a story of survival, rediscovery, and the restoration of pride and dignity. It is a story of a society revaluing its relationship to its island home. It is a story that is crucially important as the world's populations struggle with the ability to live in balance with our island that we call Earth. It is a story that is still being written for our children and all future generations.

## Sermon

Did any of you go down to Magic Island to welcome Hōkūle'a home last Saturday? I missed it, but I did watch Nainoa Thompson's homecoming address on TV. What an amazing man: a visionary . . . a courageous voyager . . . a deeply humble hero . . . the kind of hero every kid in Hawai'i should worship.

Early in his speech, he quoted his father, "If you believe in something . . . if you believe in the need to make things pono, to make things right, then you should have the courage to try." Try he did. Despite grave doubts . . . despite fear for his life and for the lives of his crew . . . fear of failure . . . despite all the fears, he tried . . . and Hōkūle'a succeeded! He gave credit to everyone involved: the leadership of the Polynesian Voyaging Society . . . his teachers, the last generation of traditional Polynesian wayfinders . . . the crew on Hōkūle'a's voyage to Tahiti in 1976 . . . He gave credit to everyone . . . except himself.

Later in his talk, he quoted a close friend and fellow voyager, Colonel Lacy Veach, the second astronaut from Hawaii. He told of a time when the two of them were high on the side of Mauna Kea, lying on black lava to absorb the light and bring the stars closer. Veach says to

him, “About this island we call Earth, there’s no other one like it. We have the most powerful instruments in the world. The Hubble can see 13 billion light years into space. That’s 13 billion years of history of light traveling through space. That’s close to the Great Bang. The Great Bang’s so powerful it didn’t have light. Not gonna find it. But we can find life. If we are so intelligent, if we are so brilliant, and if we are so accomplished we can do anything we want to do, why are we putting our children’s future at risk?”

*Why are we putting the future of our children, our children’s children, and future of generations of all life on Earth, at risk?*

*Why?!*

The answer, my sisters and brothers, is simply stated: The foundation of western civilization is a creation story whose end game is suicide. You know this story. You probably heard at least parts of it:

*“When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”*

In five days God created almost everything: sea, sky, land, plants, animals, all in magnificent abundance. God placed the stars in the sky to shine down upon *us*. He created the sun and moon so *we* would have night and day.

On the sixth day,

*God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.'*

And God gave all seed-bearing plants to man to nourish him. To the animals God gave all the green plants.

*"And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day."*

On the seventh day God rested. His work was complete. I'm sure God was pleased with his masterpiece and enjoyed sweet dreams for the future of his creation.

When I hear this story, I imagine a raging bonfire somewhere in the Middle East several thousand years ago. A few dozen people gathered 'round a priest who recites an ancient story, one that has been passed down through the ages. It is their creation story. It tells them who they are, where they came from, and why they are here. It gives their lives meaning. It is their sacred story. It is the foundation upon which their culture is built.

It was the sacred creation story of the ancient Israelites. Passed down through countless generations, orally and written, it became *our* sacred story.

It was a seminal story: It shaped our view of the world. It told us that the universe is the creation of a divine source that exists outside the universe . . . that the source exists beyond the limits of material reality . . . that the relationship of the source to the human is transcendent . . . and that while the material world is a reflection of the source, it is not holy . . . not sacred.

This worldview leads us to a sense of separation from the earth . . . a sense of dominion that allows us free reign over it. Genesis says that humans are God's special creation, *apart* from the Earth, free to treat it as an object — of value only when transformed into money and ultimately into garbage.

Western civilization has been guided by this cosmology for at least six centuries. We of European descent have worked diligently to spread it globally. We pretend there are no natural limits . . . that we can pollute without consequences . . . that we can keep digging, cutting, and exterminating forever . . . that our children's children will not suffer from our recklessness.

Bitter experience has shown this anthropocentric reading of Genesis to be dangerous. Living systems on Earth are on the verge of catastrophe. Humanity is on a suicidal trajectory, and we may well take life as we know it with us.

However, our drive to pick apart the inner workings of nature has led us to discover that our assumptions about the material world are false. When we peer into our microscopes at the atoms that constitute what we regard as the material world, we find they are mostly non-material. The stars that shine down on us from heaven are unimaginably far away and far between. They were not placed there for our enjoyment, they have been part of an evolutionary process that began long, long ago.

We are nowhere near the center of the universe; truth be told, the universe is so vast and the number of

stars so great that it's improbable that our garden planet is singular and we are alone.

If our assumptions about our place in the world are false, then we must find another way of being in the world.

We are the first generation to know the story of the universe. It is a process. Our solar system is a recent manifestation—a mere five billion years—of a 15 billion-year process. The Earth is an even more recent manifestation, four-and-a-half billion years. Life on Earth, four billion years. Humanoids, 2.6 million years.

The universe has had a deep spiritual interior, expanding and unfolding since the Great Bang, as Lacey Veach called it.

This is our new origin story. It brings a new cosmology that leads us to a new understanding of ourselves: We are directly connected to everything that is. Our origin comes from an irreducible source that has within it all the potential that the universe can possibly manifest. We humans live in communion with that source and all that exists through it.

As eco-theologian Thomas Berry says,



*“The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”*

To whom shall we turn for guidance in understanding our place in the Earth Community? There are living indigenous, Earth-referencing traditions in whom we can find wisdom.

In his book *The Dream of the Earth* Thomas Berry states:

*“Just now one of the significant historical roles of the primal people of the world is not simply to sustain their own traditions, but to call the entire civilized world back to a more authentic mode of being.”*

It is imperative that we, the heirs of the Western worldview, mend our wicked ways and wholeheartedly embrace Earth Community. We can do this, but not without guidance from mother Earth’s primal people.

But, here’s the rub: the primal guides most readily available to us are ones whose cultures we attempted to crush beneath our global empire: the indigenous North Americans and Hawaiians. Now, we need them for the Great Turning from Empire to Earth Community to occur. But the bitterness over attempted genocide

persists. The anger over boarding schools persists. The pain of dislocation persists. How do we atone for that? How do we humbly ask for help when we've proven ourselves untrustworthy?

I don't know. I believe that if we don't ask, the answer is "NO," and humanity is likely to be proven an evolutionary dead end. Mother Earth is unforgiving.

The story of Hōkūle'a is a beacon of hope. Returning to our opening words we read "It is story of a society revaluing its relationship to its island home. It is a story that is crucially important as the world's populations struggle with the ability to live in balance with our island that we call Earth." Hōkūle'a stands ready.

I leave you with this:

The universe story is my story . . . my sacred creation story. It is the story of the origin and process of the universe, as observed through the lens of science. It tells me who I am, where I came from, where I am going, and why am I here.

It should come as no surprise that I'm in love with the Thirty-Meter Telescope. With it, the telling of the story will continue.

BUT!

The TMT is also a symbol of the conflict between Empire and Earth Community. There are native Hawaiians who resist its construction on Mauna Kea because it encroaches on land that they hold sacred. And they are fed up with promises broken during construction and operation of other telescopes.

I would love it if the plaintiffs saw the TMT as an extension of their tradition of wayfinding guided by the stars, like Hōkūle'a. But it's not my decision. If I were to offer them advice, it would be disrespectful. It's not my sacred mountain. I'm entitled to my opinion, but it's not my decision.

If we are going to call on the native Hawaiians for guidance in navigating the Great Turning toward Earth Community, we need to express our willingness to let the TMT go somewhere else, as a token of atonement. The Universe story will continue to unfold. The science will continue, just not here. And we will have taken a small step toward a relationship of trust, a vital force of Earth Community.

With the help of our Hawai'ian neighbors and other primal peoples, we can "Turn the World Around."

So be it. Amen. Blessed be.

### **Closing Words**

“The comprehensive objective of the Ecozoic era is to assist in establishing a mutually enhancing human presence upon the Earth. This cannot, obviously, be achieved immediately. But if this is not achieved in some manner or within some acceptable limits the human will continue to exist in a progressively degraded mode of being. The degradation both to ourselves and to the planet is the immediate evil that we are dealing with. The enhancement or the degradation will be a shared experience. We have a common destiny. Not simply a common human destiny, but a common destiny for all the components of the planetary community.” (Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story*, 251).