INTRODUCTION

We are like flies crawling across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: We cannot see What angels and gods lie underneath the threshold of our perceptions. We do not live in reality: we live in our paradigms, our habituated perceptions, our illusions. The illusions we share through culture we call reality, but the true historical reality of our condition is unknown to us.

William Irwin Thompson

Although the idea may seem counterintuitive, the position taken in this book is that our understanding of the world is actually obtained through the medium of Myth. What, actually is a myth? For one thing, it is not synonymous with an untruth. A myth is a story line, one that serves to unfold the world-view of a given culture. It can be said that a culture is made up of the totality of those persons who act out the story line of the myth. What, then, are the ingredients of the grand cultural myth? I believe that the best summary is that written by the artist, Paul Gauguin:

Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?

In the earlier edition of this book, I listed four ingredients of that story line. It must contain: (1) a presentation of The Official Creation Myth, a description of how the world came into being: (2) a description of how the people and their culture came to exist: (3) an apocalyptic element, forecasting our cultural destiny: (4) finally, a part of the myth prescribing what actions we must take in order to function properly as actors in the story line. Thus the myth provides the ‘script,’ showing us our prescribed roles in the unrolling story line—those actions that we perform on a daily basis. Although the myth’s content contains a heavy dose of fiction, we must not assume that it is unalloyed falsehood, either. Rather, it is an artful blend of fable, with just enough of fact built into its structure to ensure its stability. If you would like an example that is ‘close to home,’ consider America, as ‘a city on a hill,’ a metaphor used by John Winthrop in, (I believe), 1627, as his ship, the Arabella, was on its way to The Massachusetts Colony. There is a lot of food for thought there, if you are gifted with robust digestion.

The mythic structure underlying Modern Civilization is one that is quite rich and complex; but much of it was put in place during the seventeenth century by just six people: Galileo Galilei, René Descartes, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Their contributions will be discussed in Chapters Two, Four, Five and Six. Since that time it has been necessary to create several amendments to the original scenario; but it is really uncanny, how the original, gut-level content of that story line has persisted in spite of everything. Even now, at a time when The Myth shows unmistakable signs of unraveling, the worldview created by these six gentlemen has infiltrated our way of thinking to such an extent that it still be found at any time on the pages of the New York Times or The Wall Street Journal.
Myth is neither a friend nor an enemy. And it is, up to a point, indispensible. But past that point it becomes a ‘false friend.’ This is because Myth is essential for action; it operates at the gut level. We must mythologize in order to live. If we, like certain thinkers in the past, refuse to recite our lines from the official script and ‘go off-message,’ then there will be consequences: for one thing, we will be forced to create and act out a myth of our own making. In addition, in our conversations with other people, uncomfortable moments will often occur, often producing social marginalization. However miserable the melody, we are expected to sing in unison!

Why is this true? Someone once remarked that in this country most people are “either Protestant or Catholic, either Democrats or Republicans.” These categories are like little boxes: and act as a form of Social Control, deterrents to actual thinking. To think outside the box requires effort—and often a certain amount of dissembling.

No two persons will produce exactly the same version of The Central Myth of Western Civilization, but it is easy to compose a “short list” of essential ingredients. Here are some of them:

1) The human race is the final inheritor of the world.
2) Modern Civilization provides the final pattern for the way in which people are going to live.
3) Modern Civilization will last forever, (or for millennia, at least), and our situation is constantly improving.
4) It is our duty to do our best to see that the above happens.
5) Domestication is our destiny. We domesticate plants and other animals. We must not shrink from submitting to domesticating ourselves.
6) The world we have inherited is devoid of intrinsic significance and value; (“undeveloped,” is the popular euphemism), except for whatever significance that humans deign to bestow upon it.
7) It is the right and duty of humans to give meaning to the planet by making it over in our own image, thereby increasing the ‘order’ of the world.
8) We inhabit a world that is composed of objects, (a world of nouns) having properties that are intrinsic, that is: independent of any beings that experience them, (a concept called “radical atomism”). The only real knowledge is objective knowledge.
9) The behavior of every object can always be explained in terms of the behavior of its parts.
10) The scientific method is “omnicompetent.” The laws of science as we know it today are final and exhaustive. That is: the roster of laws needs no further extension.

In direct contradiction to the mythic story line, I assert that human activity does not increase the order of the world; it actually decreases that order. Artifacts such as cities represent islands of order created at the expense of the rest of the planet, which thereby suffers a disproportionately greater degree of disorder.
In 1959 Writer Aldous Huxley delivered a series of lectures at The University of California at Santa Barbara, entitled The Human Situation. In one of these lectures, entitled: Man and His Planet, Huxley chronicled the deforestation of Europe and North America, reminding us that Provence, whose present semi-arid landscape was so powerfully depicted by painter Paul Cezanne, had actually been covered by dense forests, up until Roman times. Huxley was quite explicit about the theme of his lecture:

**Forests precede Civilization; deserts follow.**

That remark was made at the end of the eighteenth century, by François de Chateaubriand, who was watching barges laden with firewood, as they moved down the Seine to Paris. The consequences, if this is true, are nothing short of devastating. For one thing, it directly contradicts the Central Myth of Modern Civilization; for then, how can Civilization, seen as a project, be worth carrying out? If the final result of Civilization is the sucking of the life from the planet, and if we have been conditioned to require Civilization for our daily sustenance, then we have been relegated to the status of crewmembers on a self-destroying machine. I had not realized it at the time, but this scenario bears a certain resemblance to the plot of that greatest of all American novels: *Moby Dick*! In the latter case the whaling ship *Pequod* is a metaphor for America. Writer Chris Hedges’ analysis of this novel is Required Reading for understanding life in America.

At this point we need to make an excursion into the field of astronomy, because the career of a civilization bears a certain resemblance to that of a star. They both must burn fuel in order to live. A star, as it goes through its cycle, burns its own substance as fuel. At first, a civilization obtains fuel by plundering its neighbors. When this is no longer possible, it is the beginning of the end. But Civilization in general is really only a parasite on the planet.

One of the most challenging aspects of the Great Myth is the notion that the universe is, for practical purposes, comprehensible to the human intellect.

You have probably heard of the Faust legend: about a philosopher-alchemist in the Renaissance, who is said to have sold his soul to the Devil in trade for infinite power. This legend, a Myth For Our Time, has been immortalized in literature for over four centuries. I shall try to make the case that it is not unreasonable to describe Western Civilization as a “Faustian Culture.” So, to what extent has the Devil lived up to his share of that bargain? The answer is: *all too well.*

For the Faust story has for, us, a more sober sequel. It has given rise to a turn of phrase in the English language, namely: ‘The Faustian Bargain’. For our purposes, it means that you get to do what you ask for—but you are damned if you try to stop doing it. This, from Goethe’s *Faust* (my translation) is
Faust’s bargain with Mephistopheles:

“Shake on it!
If I e’er say to the passing moment:
‘Stay yet a while, so fair thou art,
Then you may throw me in chains!’”

Our pursuit of science has given us material progress, (economic growth), as well as the illusion of control. But we can’t stop without mass starvation, nor can we continue to go forward. If I insist on having growth, I have become a cancer upon the world. We do not have a problem here; what we have instead, is a predicament, for it is we who constitute the problem!

The beginning of the twentieth century marked the birth of the Quantum Theory. However, more than a quarter-century of inspired work was necessary before physicists began to realize that they had to come to terms with a strange and rebellious child. To date, the theory, now grown to maturity, has successfully beaten back all challengers. It is the most comprehensive, the most successful theory that scientists have ever produced. But it was the Quantum Theory that made it clear that nature is not visualizeable, because nature is not a thing ‘out there.’ It is no longer possible to separate the subject of a sentence from the object in a consistent manner. Nature is a vast mosaic of events, of which ‘we’ form but a part.

Finally, in response to that list of ingredients of The Central Myth: They are not even wrong. They may have, at one time, had their use, but now they are merely gibberish.