

The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation

Mark Hathaway & Leonardo Boff, 2009. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York

Review by Steven E. Wallis¹

This book is structured in three parts. The first part (about 100 pages) recounts the growing threat of global ecological collapse. The second part (about 200 pages) investigates cosmology; including discussions around Gaia, the pregnant void, and holographic cosmos. The final part (about 100 pages) is focused on spirituality, with particular effort applied to finding a common thread among the world's major religions. Those threads support the authors' cosmology and conclusion that we should all follow a specific path towards self-liberation. With the liberation of self, the authors quite reasonably claim, we will become more effective in practice and so better able to save the human race and our planet.

For this review, I began by reading with an appreciative eye. And, from that view, some are likely to find this an interesting book. The authors present a wealth of information on many topics including physics, religion, biology, systems theory, and creativity. They also engage in an extensive conversation around globalization, domination, deep ecology, and spirituality.

Next, in reading this book with a critical eye, the book appears to be well written. Indeed, the authors have crafted a work that readers will find quite accessible. They have purposefully structured the book in something of a spiral by revisiting key topics from different perspectives as they proceed through the cycle. Examples are found in modern science, ethics, economics, politics, transnational corporations, and more. Their main effort is to present a link between the critical state of the global ecology and the spiritual practices that we might draw upon to empower ourselves.

In a nutshell, they describe the domination and destruction of the ecosystem by those who are blinded by a systemic pathology. Goals of wealth and power, limitless growth, and desire for a global monoculture have blinded many to the precarious state of our ecosystem. They also reasonably note how most humans are (in one way or another) complicit in that pathology (and are likewise blinded). The authors suggest that we fear to give up our way of life – even if is

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necessary to save the planet. In order to see clearly, make wise choices, and enact critical changes, we must first liberate ourselves from our fears.

To escape those fears, we must move away from oppression (of ourselves and others) and toward a sense of liberation. To achieve this shift, we should first understand that all people are sensitive and compassionate. Second, they suggest that we should expand our sense of self to include the whole of our planet. This, they say, will lead to a better sense of community, artistry, and appreciation for the beauty of nature. From a cosmological perspective, that shift would be supported by a new view of the universe. The authors discuss how the universe is fundamentally open to many possibilities. For example, most of our universe (including seemingly solid objects) is actually empty space – thus allowing for emergence, surprise, and innovation.

Adopting that view, they suggest, will allow us to liberate ourselves and so enact the future needed to save our planet. While none of these ideas are particularly novel, that message may be of interest to appreciative readers. As with many books of this type, however, their analyses are neither rigorous nor complete. Critical readers will be very aware that the authors present contradictory perspectives, engage in questionable leaps of logic, and present curious styles of reasoning.

One such contradiction begins with the Tao and its suggestion that we are all one and closely interconnected. Instead of following the Tao, the authors press forward with ideas that separate rather than integrate. They separate modern ideas from the postmodern, separate the global elite from the masses, separate the responsible from the innocent, and so on. For another example, the authors decry the “wealth gap,” while they also claim “money is an illusion.” Another related contradiction is seen between the authors’ perspective that the universe is continually evolving (on one hand) and the perception that the powerful individuals and corporations are standing in the way of that evolution (on the other hand). This view seems to suggest that those corporations are somehow outside that cycle of evolution. And, while transnational corporations are indeed powerful, it is hard for me to accept that they are so powerful that they can somehow escape the natural laws of the universe.

While these contradictions do not appear to be purposeful, we need not see them as problematic. Indeed, by reading with an integrative eye, those contradictions may represent the best reason to read *The Tao of Liberation*. Such contradictions may be more usefully viewed as chunks of raw material from which thinkers might build more profound insights. In short, I would suggest that the “space” between those contradictory views is open for the emerging ideas of deeply reflexive readers.

For example, instead of adopting the “us versus them” view of the world, I would suggest that readers who are bold enough to engage this book with an integrative eye might consider how we are all part of the same system. And, by developing a better understanding of that system, investigate how we might optimize our individual, organizational, and global conditions.

In addition to the excessive differentiation, this book also challenged my sensibilities in its discussion of cosmology. First, the authors recount multiple claims for the existence of an “alternative” universe. That other universe is variously represented as a primal universe,

holographic universe, implicate order, and morphic field. The existence of this primal universe is certainly intriguing. It is reported to be a place of great interconnectedness and a conduit for insight, creativity, communication and memory. The alternative universe transcends (and renders irrelevant) the dimensions of time and space that we find in our own universe. Through meditation, they suggest, one may connect with that universe to become more creative and gain new insights.

After many pages, I found myself wondering about the need for a cosmological justification for meditative practices. Practically and functionally, if one meditates and successfully achieves insight, does it really matter “where” that insight comes from? In short, it seems to this reviewer that the authors created an unnecessarily complex picture of a destination in order to justify the relatively simple path of meditation.

Overall, reading this book is like strolling through a bustling farmer’s market. In looking at that many options, one is inspired to consider how they may be combined for a tasty dinner. There does not seem to be much that is new in this market, but there is a multitude of possibilities for combining those ingredients. This suggests many levels of possible engagement for this book. On one level, the appreciative reader may adopt any of the many concepts presented here. In contrast, the critical reader will likely be frustrated by the curious cosmology and unnecessary complexity. The more contemplative reader, with a more integrative eye, may engage this book on a deeper level. Those scholars may go beyond the loose weave of ideas presented in this book to create a more effective integration of ideas. And, in that process, develop much needed, and much more innovative ideas.