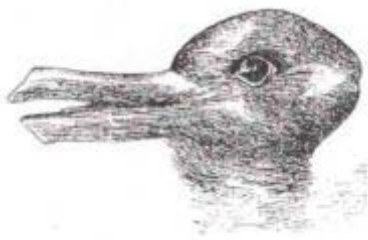


A REVOLUTION IN THE MONASTERY

In 1962 the physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn published a groundbreaking book on the philosophy of science - *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The most important insight was that the practice of science is not a linear progression towards the truth but a series of revolutions that shatter a period of stasis. The revolutions are the result of a build up of anomalies that can't be explained by the norms of the time, eventually someone has a profoundly different vision that transforms the way scientists see the world and suggests a solution to the anomalies. A revolution then occurs and everything is challenged and re-evaluated. This is not a refinement of a theory but a totally new understanding about how the world works. Its acceptance is hard fought and never easy; after all, the revolution requires scientists to redefine what they understand to be true. Kuhn used the optical illusion below to illustrate the point. You can either see a rabbit or a duck, but you can't see both at the same time. The switch from Newtonian physics to Einstein's theory of Relativity is a famous example, as is the acceptance that the sun, not the earth, at the centre of our solar system. Darwinian evolution was a profound shift as was the theory of plate tectonics. Once the switch has been made and the new world view accepted it is impossible to go back again; everything is different.



Kuhn coined the phrase “paradigm shift” for this change in view, and it has since been used in many different contexts. I feel we are at the beginning of a paradigm shift now, not so much in science but in our view of the natural world. At the moment we are in a period of turmoil and conflict. Our established view, which has ticked along for the last 200 years in the West, is that the world produces resources for humankind to use for their own ends and for the development of economies. But things are happening which are putting this view severely to the test. The climate is changing, species are disappearing, rainfall patterns are shifting, and deserts are expanding. If the earth was a large, bottomless treasure trove and could accommodate all our activities then why are these things happening? And so now we are seeing the emergence (or re-emergence) of different world views, and soon one of them will take over.

One is that the earth is not purely a store of resources for our use but should be treated as a living organism that is self regulating and totally integrated (Gaia theory). On this integrated earth all living things can have an affect on how the whole system functions and have the ability to profoundly change its state. James Lovelock, who proposed the Gaia theory, believes we are heading for a change of state from cool to warm and there is nothing at all we can do now to prevent it. The consequences he says will be utterly disastrous.

Another competing paradigm is that the earth is not the faithful supplier of goods but is fragile, easily spoiled and capable of profoundly damaging changes that will affect all human life. The earth is not like a boxer's punch ball that is designed to withstand all the blows we

can inflict, but more like a human body, able to take only so much before the damage leads to collapse and serious trauma. If we reduce the blows and give the earth time to recover we can bring it back from the point of collapse, if we carry on pounding away, large areas of the earth will die.

Of course there is the Christian view that the earth is God's gift and that we are charged with the awesome responsibility to tend and care for it and that we will be held to account for our activities. This is not so much a new idea, rather one that has been buried under layers of secular culture for hundreds of years. But it is once again coming into popular consciousness and contributing to the increasing number of voices for a change in the way we view the earth.

But whichever paradigm is the eventual cause of revolution it will have a great effect on all of us. Just like the optical illusion above it will require all of us to change a duck into a rabbit. We will have to see the world around us in an entirely new way. For example a tree is no longer just a big plant that is useful for timber or part of the scenery, it is a provider of habitat for thousands of other species, it is an absorber of carbon dioxide and it is vital for fixing soils. And, if we believe in God, it is a great gift that requires us to be humbled, respectful and in awe of the power that enabled it to exist.

Great poets have always used the natural world to hint at this other world view; the poetry of Robert Frost is particularly soulful and full of insight. With the deftness of mind only poets seem to possess, Frost presents us with a natural world at once familiar and yet also profoundly spiritual.

PUTTING IN THE SEED

You come to fetch me from my work to-night
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea);
And go along with you ere you lose sight
Of what you came for and become like me,
Slave to a Springtime passion for the earth.
How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

This ability of Frost and others to take the ordinary and make it extraordinary is what we all have to do if we are going to succeed in revolutionising our world view. At the moment the emphasis is on practical measures, change light bulbs, turn down the heating, and don't drive so much. But to have a revolution we need to do much, much more and this is where Christianity helps so much. If the earth is truly the handiwork of God, a glimpse of his awesome power and a gift to be treasured then we will never be wasteful, greedy and disrespectful. If we have a truly Christian view of the natural world then we will naturally want to live simply, respectfully, in community and centred in one place.

Does this sound familiar? Anyone reading the Rule of St Benedict will recognise these principles underlying monastic life. Perhaps, without realising it, monasteries have been supplying the template upon which we can build a revolutionary new society that naturally and easily respects the earth and sees the spiritual nature of all things. Deep at the heart of “green living” is a belief in community and respect for others and the environment. Deep in the heart of monastic life is exactly the same thing, with God as the meaning behind it all. Rowan Williams obviously believes we have a lot to learn from St Benedict about a new future in Europe (Speech given at St Anslemo in Rome, 21st November 2006).

Monastic values transported into everyday life can make the ordinary extraordinary, make the physical spiritual and transform crisis into a time of grace. The wisdom of The Rule is deep and wide and now is the time to make that wisdom known to the secular world. To see God in all things and to live accordingly is surely the paradigm shift which could save us from ecological crisis.