

Insight Outlook

UNDERSTANDING OUR MOMENT IN HISTORY An Interview with Richard Tarnas

From the radio series *Insight & Outlook* hosted by Scott London

In his masterful intellectual history *The Passion of the Western Mind*, Richard Tarnas surveys the evolution of Western thought from ancient Greece to the Renaissance, from the scientific revolution to the dawn of the 21st century, illuminating the pivotal ideas in philosophy, religion, and science that have forged our unique cultural outlook. He also reflects on our curious postmodern predicament at the end of the millennium. Today, he says, we find ourselves wandering disconsolately between two worlds, one dying, the other struggling to be born. On the one hand, the spiritual and intellectual certainties of the past no longer command our allegiance. On the other, the promises of a more integral worldview, a cosmology of tomorrow – one based on a deeper relationship with nature and with the larger cosmos – require of us a leap of faith few are ready to take. With the future of the human spirit and the future of the planet hanging in the balance, we have no choice but to embrace courage, imagination, and our deepest inner resources.

Richard Tarnas is a graduate of Harvard University and the Saybrook Institute. He was for ten years the Director of Programs at the Esalen Institute. He is currently Director of the graduate program in Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness at the California Institute of Integral Studies and adjunct faculty member of Pacifica Graduate Institute.

*

SCOTT LONDON: You point out that a widespread sense of urgency is tangible on many levels today, as if one historical era is coming to an end and another is about to begin.

RICHARD TARNAS: Yes, there is a real awareness that things have to change. People are becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that the ecological situation is critical and that we cannot continue to live according to the same assumptions with which we have lived blithely for the past several hundred years. There are also social, economic, and political dimensions to the crisis. There is the unprecedented plurality of perspectives and worldviews and religious and philosophical and political perspectives that are in the air. And, when it comes down to it, there is a spiritual crisis that pervades our world.

I think it affects everybody, but the more informed and thoughtful a person is, the more aware they are of the reality of the spiritual crisis. We live in a world in which mainstream, conventional modern science has essentially voided the cosmos of all intrinsic meaning and purpose. There is no spiritual dimension to it from its point of view. The intellectual power of mainstream modern science has effectively defined what kind of cosmos we live in. And yet human beings aspire for spiritual significance in the life that they lead and in the world that they live in. It is only, I think, though going through a profound inner transformation, and also an intellectual transformation, that one can see beyond that crisis and come into a world of a different kind.

LONDON: There is a lot of talk now about paradigm shifts, about the emergence of new conceptual frameworks and intellectual orientations. Is that what you are talking about?

TARNAS: Very much. We're in what people call the postmodern era. If we are to define what postmodern is, it is in many ways the era between eras. Every era, in a sense, has a worldview that informs its ways of looking at history, at the human being in the world, and so forth. In the postmodern era, our worldview is so fraught with uncertainty that we don't know for sure what is objectively out there. So there is a kind of skepticism about any worldview, about any paradigms. Our postmodern paradigm is, in a sense, "anti-paradigmatic" – it is against the very idea that there could be a compelling, comprehensive Worldview

LONDON: When Thomas Kuhn introduced the idea of paradigms back in the early sixties, he was speaking of them in the context of science. One of the points he made is that young scientists, or people who are new to the profession, tend to be the most important carriers of the new paradigm. He also said that a paradigm shift is never really complete until the old guard dies. Are we are seeing the death of the old order?

TARNAS: Yes, very much. I think Thomas Kuhn quoted Max Planck about the idea that a paradigm in science does not shift simply because the evidence in favor of the new one begins to outweigh the old paradigm. It's not a rational, empirical shift. That is because there is so much investment – psychological, unconscious, as well as economic – in the old paradigm by individuals who have lived their whole lives within it. They can't go through that kind of gestalt-switch. As Kuhn says, two people who are working within different paradigms are almost, in a sense, in different universes. If you have lived within one long enough and you are not graced with a kind of illumination which helps you break out of the old worldview, it is very difficult to make your way into it.

LONDON: Can you offer examples of this kind of thing?

TARNAS: Oh, sure. There are all kinds of implications of David Bohm's work in physics, for example, or Rupert Sheldrake's work in biology, or Gregory Bateson's work in systems theory. But if you were to read most of the conventional papers or commentaries in physics or biology journals, you would see that on those rare occasions when Rupert Sheldrake or David Bohm come into their discussion, it is with total scorn or rejection, and very little sensitive appreciation for what is actually happening.

That is fairly typical. When Copernicus said what he had to say in 1543, very few people were ready to hear it and it took a generation or two before enough intelligent people were able to marshal enough evidence, and enough other factors – sociological, religious, philosophical, technological (like the coming of the telescope into Galileo’s hands) – to bring about a paradigm shift, even though the basic framework of the new paradigm was totally in place and articulated fifty years earlier. So one has to be patient.

LONDON: One of the things that your book really makes clear is that the history of the Western mind is really the history of men – from Socrates and Aristotle to Copernicus and Darwin. But that masculine emphasis is beginning, finally, to give way to something new. A clear indication of that is the way that certain stock phrases that were so common only a few decades ago now sound strangely anachronistic and even sexist – phrases like “the ascent of man,” “man’s relation to God,” “man’s struggle with nature,” “the great achievement of modern man,” and so forth.

TARNAS: Yes. Language always reflects the deeper impulses at work in a worldview. From the ancient Greeks on, all the major languages within which the Western worldview has been articulated have had a masculine orientation. The word for human being that was most frequently used to sum up the human enterprise was masculine in gender – *anthropos* in Greek, *homo* in Latin, *Der Mensch* in German, *man* in English. It’s only in the past generation that we have become aware of the extent to which that has shielded a tremendous masculine bias in the way we look at the world.

In general, the whole Western intellectual tradition has been a tradition of extremely brilliant, innovative men writing for other men in a patrilineal tradition. There are many reasons behind it. But what I have suggested is that, beyond the sociological reasons, beyond the desire of males to have power and to keep women less in a central role in shaping their world and their worldview, I believe something deeper has been going on, something archetypal. There has been a masculine impulse at work in both men and women that has constantly pressed the Western mind and the Western spirit to assert an autonomy, to separate itself, disengage the human being from the matrix of nature from which it emerged, and to create freedom for itself and control over its environment in order to have greater and greater autonomy. That has been a tremendous quest, that forging of an autonomous intellectual and moral self that is transcendent, in some ways, to the world around it.

My sense is that the crisis of modern man is a masculine crisis. The resolution of this crisis is emerging in our own time in a tremendous empowerment and resurgence of the feminine. It’s visible not only in feminism itself – in the empowerment of women and the new sense of the importance of feminine values in both men and women – but also in a whole new sensibility of the interconnectedness of all life – the ecological identity, the sense that my self is not me as a human being, but that I am rooted in a whole matrix that includes all of nature, the planet, the cosmos itself.

LONDON: Hegel once said that a civilization can’t become conscious of itself and can’t recognize its own significance until it’s so mature that it’s approaching its own death. Is that what is happening to us?

TARNAS: I think that is exactly right. He had noticed that tendency in looking at civilizations prior to his own. He didn't, I think, realize that it was about to happen to his own, certainly not in the form it's taken. We notice this in our individual lives. It's often when we have either a near-death experience or are approaching death that certain things become clear about our lives that were never clear until that moment is confronted. I think our entire civilization is going through that moment.

LONDON: It's become fashionable today to speak of the decline of Western civilization. People like Robert Hughes and Gore Vidal like to compare our society today to Rome just before the fall. But what you're talking about, it seems to me, is not so much a collapse as a transition or renewal.

TARNAS: Yes, that's Spengler's view, of course, the great German historian, in his work *The Decline of the West*, which has affected so many. I don't necessarily see a simple decline and fall. I think something subtler is happening. What will happen will very much depend on the consciousness that human beings in our society – and particularly a certain core of our society – bring to this moment.

There is no question that if we look around at the world today, we cannot avoid the fact that something big is dying. We are watching it and we are experiencing it. But the great challenge that all of us face as individuals is also being faced by our civilization. That is, can we go through that death at an inner level? Can we recognize the great spiritual, archetypal dimension to that death and go through it at that level? Or, will we be unconscious, blind to that deeper reality and act out self-destructively by making our world ecologically unlivable or killing each other in nationalistic competition, or whatever? Those are the choices.

Was it H. G. Wells who said, "Our civilization is in a race between education and catastrophe"? It is that kind of choice we are in right now. The education isn't just (as I think Wells would have had in mind) the European, rational, Enlightenment education – better science, better rational understanding of our situation. It's more than that. It involves a psychological awakening to the unconscious impulses that are at work inside us and in our civilization. It is a psychological and spiritual education that has to occur as well as an intellectual one.

LONDON: You've written about the importance of a core of people in a society being historically informed. Why is that so important?

TARNAS: In order to understand our moment in history and where we can go in the future, we have to know what brought us here. In order to be strategically intelligent, we need to be able to comprehend the sources of our world. Our world is shaped by our worldview. How we approach reality is defined by the kinds of assumptions we have about that reality, and that, in turn, shapes reality and feeds it back to us. The subject and the object are deeply implicated in each other.

In this sense, it's very important for us to understand the sources of our worldview and therefore the whole history of our philosophies, our sciences, our religions that have led us to this point and shaped the worldview that we now find ourselves in.

LONDON: I take it this was your rationale for writing *The Passion of the Western Mind*?

TARNAS: Yes, I felt it was really important to write a work that would, in basically one volume, attempt to coherently describe the great evolution of the Western worldview, starting with the ancient Greeks and Hebrews and going right up through the classical period, the medieval period, the Renaissance, the scientific revolution, modernity, and now our own postmodern era where everything is in such flux.

Although I wrote it for the general reader, it is actually used by quite a few universities now in the history of philosophy or theology courses, or Western Civ-type courses. What I wanted was to have the book available to others that I wish I had had available to me when I was in college, or afterwards. We get so many ideas thrown at us. We live in an age of such an information glut. Even in college where one is often – in a good liberal education – exposed to so many great ideas, from the Greeks to the so-called great books of Western civilization and so forth (and I do believe there are great books, though there are many more than are included in the canon), it's very difficult when you are 18 or 22 or even 29 to be able to place in context all those ideas – what Plato thought about this, or what Descartes thought about this, or what Thomas Aquinas or Nietzsche said. They are coming at one, and one doesn't have a framework, a context in which they make sense. So what I wanted to do was to write something in which all of these could be seen in their place in the great epic story that our great Western mind and spirit have lived out. I kind of just wrote the book I wish I had had.

LONDON: Joseph Campbell once said that mythology is, in a sense, truer than history since it reflects the deeper currents of a civilization. Do you agree?

TARNAS: I think our perspectives on history are always shaped by our era. Yet I think it's important for every generation to rethink its history and bring forth a new perspective that reflects its deepest intuitions about what's going on. Also, it's important to be as rigorous and as faithful to the evidence as possible – but the evidence itself is always changing. New interpretations reveal new evidence and reveal new dimensions of old evidence. So it's a constantly evolving reality that we are looking back at.

LONDON: You recently said that Madonna, the pop star, is representative of certain aspects of what we are going through as a civilization right now. What did you mean by that?

TARNAS: Well, she's Roman Catholic, born and raised Roman Catholic. On the other hand, she is filled with this pagan, libidinal, Dionysian sexual quality. She is also very commercially oriented, so she combines all these things. Also, the name Madonna, of course, has tremendous Christian and particularly Catholic connotations. She is the whore rather than the Madonna in the classic duality. So, naturally, it pushes all the buttons of the more fundamentalist Christian perspective. It also pushes all the buttons, more positively, of those people who respond to that erotic quality of what she is doing.

In the individual's psychological and spiritual journey (Stanislav Grof talks about this in his work), as one approaches ego death in the later stages of the death-rebirth process, one often begins to get very powerful spiritual imagery and sacred imagery. But it becomes mixed up, in quite bizarre

ways, with aggressively sexual and even sado-masochistic and sometimes scatological elements. A kind of blasphemous combination seems to come up in imagery and experience. By surrendering to this and then going through the final annihilation of the ego death, it opens up to an extremely pure sense of spiritual rebirth.

I feel that Madonna's combination of these very different impulses is reflective of the fact that our whole civilization is going through this birth process, this initiatory transformation. She reflects something on a collective scale.

LONDON: Other artists you've mentioned whose works juxtapose the vulgar and the sacred in this way are Robert Mapplethorpe and Andrei Serrano.

TARNAS: Yes. Again, you have the combination of this sacred image, the crucifix, and the scatological – it being submerged in the glass of urine. That image became not only controversial, it got picked up and many people were dealing with it in their consciousness. In the forties or fifties, someone like Madonna might not have ever gotten off the ground in the same way that she has now. It's because something in the collective psyche is ready to respond to that – to Mapplethorpe's art, to Madonna, to the many films that are coming out of Hollywood now that reflect similar themes and concerns. It's because this whole collective psyche is at that point where it is spontaneously getting those images brought up to consciousness.

To me it signifies that we are moving very quickly towards a critical moment of death and rebirth. That is why it takes as much psychological sophistication as we can bring to bear on this so that we can go through this process intelligently and interiorly, rather than blindly and self-destructively.

LONDON: Many cultural observers see Madonna and Mapplethorpe as a sign of cultural decline, not rebirth.

TARNAS: Both are true. There is an element of degradation, yes. But I think it's also reflective of a deeper transformation. In a way, I think Mick Jagger is a better, and certainly in my taste a more aesthetically satisfying example of this. He represents, especially beginning in the late 1960s, the Dionysian impulse arising in Western culture with tremendous force. He's now fifty years old and in better condition than almost all the 30- and 40-year-olds that I know. The Rolling Stones continue to be, I think, an embodiment of the Dionysian impulse in culture that was suppressed for so long. I think it was suppressed, to a certain extent, for a good reason. It helped forge this autonomous moral and intellectual self that the Western path has been moving toward. But at a great price. We need to own the shadow and become conscious of the unconscious. What Jagger has represented, and to a certain extent what rock and roll represents at its best, is this resurgence of the Dionysian.

LONDON: My sense is that the music coming out of the American black culture has always embodied this sort of energy.

TARNAS: Yes. And then rock and roll brought it to the wider audience of Europeans and Americans.

LONDON: In his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom singled out the Rolling Stones as the quintessential example of cultural regression.

TARNAS: Yes, and he championed Plato's Republic. I love Plato and I'm as much of a Platonist as anybody I know. But Plato's Republic would only be truly utopian and livable if it could have the Rolling Stones in it!

LONDON: [Laughs] Good point. In conclusion, tell me a thing or two about the new book you're working on.

TARNAS: Well, you know authors often don't like to say too much about the book they are right in the middle of writing. But I'll just say a couple of things about it. The title is *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New Worldview* and it's basically the sequel to *The Passion of the Western Mind*. I actually teach a course with that title at the graduate program that I teach in San Francisco. Stan Grof and I teach the course together. We teach in the philosophy and religion program and there is particular part of that program that I oversee called "Cosmology and Consciousness." Stan, myself, Brian Swimme, Charlene Spretnak, William Irwin Thompson, Robert McDermott, David Ulancey are all faculty members in it. It is a great program where we offer doctorates and masters degrees. So I'm also using material that is going into the book. But right now I'm taking a leave of absence to complete the book.

LONDON: Thank you very much.

TARNAS: It's really been my pleasure.

This interview was adapted from the radio series *Insight & Outlook*. It is available online at <http://www.scottlondon.com/insight/scripts>

Copyright by Scott London. All rights reserved.