

**A MYTH FOR OUR TIME**

by

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**DISCUSSION PAPER**

on

Paolo Soleri's

**THE URBAN EFFECT: A DOCTRINE OF THE INFANT GOD**

Underlying Paolo Soleri's paper, "The Urban Effect: A Doctrine of the Infant God", is his search for the meaning of things so that we humans can participate in our own and the larger cosmic evolution. What commitments and responsibilities are required of us? Are there universal virtues, values or imperatives? How can the dualism of matter and godliness be resolved?

His paper attempts to do this. It is a prodigious cosmic design. It is both an (untestable) escatalogical hypothesis and a scientifically informed fantasy. But the "certainty" of scientific proof or spiritual truth is set aside here. Soleri aims for a cosmic esthetic.

His paper first evoked in me this image: a wise man of great learning, skill, experience, imagination, and sensitivity -- simultaneously an artist, a scientist, and a mystic -- is asked to describe the total cosmic process and man's place in it, in fifteen pages. This might seem impossible, but the wise man answers by deftly assembling a collage from scraps of many styles of written language, personal observation, science, theology and speculation.

Depending on where one stands to view this collage, and depending on one's scientific, linguistic, artistic, or theological expectations, parts of the collage seem variously outrageous, obscure, insightful, startling, or profound. When my own expectations subsided and the underlying whole began to emerge, I found myself excited and grateful to Paolo Soleri for this unusual and unexpected gift. It is the nature of this gift that I will discuss in this response.

His paper is not the usual scientific or even theological contribution. It is surely not intended to be right or wrong, true or false, beautiful or ugly. He acknowledges that his "hypothesis does not conform with the scientific parlance" and he says "The Infant God doctrine sketched in this paper wants to be an hypothesis among the many (Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Moslem, Jew, etc.)." He says: "In its unquenchable thirst for concreteness and salvation, the mind has generated endless fantasies, this one included " (my emphasis).

At first glance this mixture of talk about scientific matters (Big Bang, computer technology, Einstein's "point of light" origin, the food chain) and seemingly religious matters (God, the Infant God, salvation, enlightenment, resurrection) -- all acknowledged as a fantasy -- might seem like a disconnected mishmash. But early in his paper Soleri says "The hypothesis of the INFANT GOD is an ~~attempt to resolve the dualism~~: 'matter' and 'godliness'." If he is going to "resolve" these apparent incommensurates, the material and the spiritual, he must use a form that transcends both.

When we want to describe some piece of nature or some aspect of human activity with (scientific or theological) precision, we invoke careful observation, the work of others, precise definition, and logic or scientific canon. But, when we stand farther back and describe the complexity of our visions or experiences, we tell a story which expresses wider meaning in metaphor, fiction, fable, parable. The most enduring and universal of these become woven into myths and legends, the most fundamental and universal encodings of our values and meanings. But, as Soleri begins his paper, "We humans crave for certainty.....we have adopted deception as an alternative to despair."

As we have addictively pursued certainty (through science?), we have dismissed myth and legend as fictional entertainment for children, and in the process we have diminished our sense of larger meaning in favor of fragmented "certainties." Our diversity has become mapped onto hierarchical evaluation. Reality is framed by a materialistic present. Time is an enemy and the future a challenge. Individuality, which we worship excessively, is loneliness seeking pride through competition for merit. Against this Paolo Soleri offers a twentieth century wholistic fantasy from which to pursue meaning -- cosmic meaning -- in our technological time.

The elements of older myths were humble seekers encountering dragons, magicians, magic weapons, wicked (or benign) kings and queens, a pantheon of manipulative gods. Always there was uncertainty and tribulation for the seeker who pursued "forever after" with courage, patience and humility. Perhaps the characters of these myths and legends and their exploits were appropriate and seemed immediate in an earlier time. Perhaps it is their distance from our present consciousness which obscures their relevance for our present world.

The elements of Soleri's mythical cosmos include: an inequitable food chain ("violence dressed up as grace"), the "urban effect" in which aggregates of organisms generate the transformation of matter into mind, a technology in which mineral silicone becomes a magic which can minaturize and transmit kingdoms of information at the speed of light, the Big Bang which began everything with chaos, and an eventual paradise of total equality, total aesthetic, and timeless duration in which all reality (the past) is resurrected "forever after" in "pure duration" and ecstasy. Soleri has even preserved for us the naive youth (the fool of the Tarot, the "little children" of the Bible, Psyche, Parsifal) but with an interesting inversion. God (the godliness of the cosmos) is the INFANT.

To make the cosmic, evolutionary quest work (and now it is not only man's quest, it is the direction of the evolving cosmos), Soleri recognizes a process he calls "Mind." But, unlike the psychologist who tries to dissect "mind" out of individual humans, Soleri sees mind as a process involving all of nature. (This idea is shared by Gregory Bateson, a scientist, who wrote Mind and Nature, a necessary unity.) Mind is the "magic" (natural law) which turns the inorganic (mineral) into itself (mind) by an ingenious and quite scientifically acceptable process: Gravity, a natural law/process, is required for erosion. Erosion leads to sedimentation required for the appearance of lakes and rivers. Erosion also produces soil which supports vegetation which, in turn, supports life/mind. "No gravity, no mind" says Soleri.

In the older myths, which were told about seeking humans, the goals were virtue, courage, love, even becoming gods. In Soleri's myth the end of the line, "Omega Point of Light," is one of all reality (the past) resurrected into total equity ("Justice is retroactive or it is pseudo-justice" and "ecological, energetic, and technological questions are religious questions.") and total esthetic ("the penetration of grace and beauty to a degree which co-involves the entire cosmic reality"). At the end, there is UNITY. All is, ultimately, interdependent. The mineral is digested into mind by the urban process and justice and grace come together ("no justice...no grace"). The injustice of the food chain (organism eats organism) represents "the intrinsically violent nature of things...us included" and, short of the Omega point, "will prevail in endless waves and universal guilt will remain a rampaging monster, a devourer of grace."

"The origin was a point of light," Soleri quotes Einstein. At that point there was total chaos, fury, inequity, mindlessness, Godlessness. At that point time-space began. As Soleri tells it, this formless mess must then "invent" (i.e. participate in) its own evolution toward the resolution (Omega point of light, total equity, total grace. Godliness, resurrection, enlightenment, unity) and the inventing process is called the "techne." Although Soleri doesn't suggest how "techne" arises from nothing to go to work, Ilya Prigogine, who was awarded a Nobel prize for his work, demonstrates that even inorganic matter in "chaos" is inherently self-organizing, thus bridging the long-standing gap between chemistry and biology. This is readably described in Order out of Chaos by Ilya Prigogine and Elizabeth Stengers. Soleri writes, "In the solar system, the major triumph of techne has been the generation of organisms." Organisms represent a major advance in the evolution toward Omega since organisms can achieve an "esthetic imperative" -- i.e. the drive that can produce the paradox of the absolute within the discreet (life within a mineral complex?)

which began the process and which transforms everything into mind.

The appearance of organisms also represents a process of increasing complexity and miniaturization extended into time. This is Soleri's C.M.D. (complexity-miniaturization duration) paradigm. He cites his discussion of these three basic parameters "from bacteria to God" in his book, ARCOSANTI, An Urban Laboratory. The "strategy by the C.M.D. paradigm" is the "urban effect ....that vivifying sequences of events....forces mineral matter to become mind." While Soleri calls this a "strategy," it is, to me, another way to talk about the self-organizing, self-correcting properties of life which were first formally described in 1945 in a paper "Behavior, Purpose, and Teleology" by Rosenblueth, Wiener and Bieglow.

In this story of the evolution from Alpha to Omega there must necessarily be a progression toward higher orders of organization -- i.e. increasing complexity and miniaturization which is durable. Organisms represent a significant advance over chaotic gasses or even stones but are, nonetheless, limited "in the direction of complexity because of the relative laggard speed involved in the transportation-transmission techniques. This could mean that the carbon-based events, the flesh, might surrender to the silicon based intellection utilizing in their entrails the speed of light."

Soleri says, "Technology is the systematic, ever-protracted demonic (the God within) stress that is instrumentalizing its own offspring in their quest for the absolute: the technology of creating the divine....Without the technological progression, reality is forced into one of the cul-de-sacs proposed by the universal religions....becomes the handy man for breakdown....consigning life to entropy." Soleri makes the point, sideways, that technology is not a monster but that our failure to understand its place in the cosmic evolution toward the adult God (Omega point) can lead us into a hopeless detour. But, our most serious concerns are yet to come. "For now, and for the foreseeable future, our silicon simpletons are not much of a menace. When their complexity-miniaturization reaches the same ball park dimensions as organisms, then we will have to face the dilemma of having 'children' made of sand and electric impulses."

Soleri's quibble with universal religions is that they "copped out" by settling for the reflected image of salvation-resurrection instead of focusing on the nature of our commitment, responsibility and participation. Universal religions, he says, preferred "Quick fix" (mindless....profoundly brutal, a betrayal, a true destroyer of mind). Universal religions avoided the matter of time (and perhaps the necessity of "restructuring nature and her laws")

and produced a dualism: God and reality. But he says that universal religions carry, overtly or covertly, manifestations of his INFANT GOD hypothesis "once a head-to-toes time flip-over is applied...The time flip-over generates the INFANT GOD at the expense of the Father/Mother God.

All the ingredients (good science, passion, personal responsibility, a time frame -- from 'Once upon a time' to 'happily ever after' -- are here for a prodigious myth for our time. Not a "fictional" myth. Not science fiction. Rather everything digested into the best possible, coherent speculation. A solid but imaginative reflection surface for the best meanings we can find in an uncertain world. A footing for our participation in Soleri's Urban Effect.

A complex design ( or collage) cannot be grasped at a glance. Soleri's design is, in my opinion, a coherent whole woven of unexpectedly interesting parts. It requires respectful study. His "restructuring nature and her laws" is a useful fantasy/myth for our time -- a gift.