

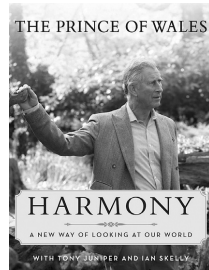
Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World

By HRH The Prince of Wales, with Tony Juniper and Ian Skelly
HarperCollins (USA), Blue Door (UK), 2010

Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani

In his introductory remarks given at the Sacred Web Conference held in Edmonton in 2006, His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales addressed a theme that has preoccupied him for many years, and which is now the title of his important new book, *Harmony*, co-authored with the help of environmental activist, Tony Juniper, and radio broadcaster, Ian Skelly. The book, and the accompanying film documentary that aired on NBC television in November 2010, bring together the various strands of Prince Charles' preoccupations and concerns about the modern world—reflected in his work in subjects as diverse as organic farming and environmentalism, science and technology, architecture and the built environment, arts and crafts, sustainable development and the alleviation of poverty, education and health-care, and pluralism and civil society—and present these various strands as part of an over-arching philosophy of the quest for harmony.

There is no doubt that the identification of the sources of the modern malaise, and of the solutions available to remedy it, are vitally important themes for any serious thinker nowadays, and so it is a shame that some reviewers of Prince Charles' initiative on both sides of the Atlantic have



expressed doubts about the ability of the book and film to garner serious interest¹. One favorable reviewer of the book has noted as follows²:

I end with a nagging sense of dislocation. *Harmony* is written by three high-profile authors and is well-placed to be widely read; it is accessible, lending it the potential of mass appeal—but will it slip into the cracks between a readership already sympathetic to its message and a media waiting to pounce?

No one is more alive to these dangers than the Prince himself. Just as at the Sacred Web Conference, Prince Charles spoke frankly about having persevered with his important work “often in the face of relentless criticism and ridicule”, so too in his new book he makes it clear that he is under no illusion that there are those scornful cynics who, favoring fashionable cleverness over the virtues of wisdom, will be inclined to dismiss his work³. Some in the media have indeed “pounced”—but they have done so without justification. This is a book written with courage, passion, and wisdom: courage, because Prince Charles has chosen to place the interests of those future generations who will inherit the world, above the tawdry witticisms and sneering cynicism of the nay-sayers; passion, because it is evident from the way in which he writes about these matters and from his work record over many years, that the Prince clearly appreciates how crucial it is for humanity to live in balance and harmony with Nature and with itself, and is a passionate advocate of these causes; and wisdom, because the preoccupations of the Prince are rooted in spiritual principles that are both timely and timeless.

The book begins with a chapter titled “Harmony”, in which Prince Charles lays out his main theme: “This book offers inspiration for those who feel, deep down, that there is a more balanced way of looking at the world, and more harmonious ways of living.” It is a theme summed up in a quotation from Wendell Berry, which appears later in the book: “Nothing exists for its own sake, but for a harmony greater than itself which includes it.”

¹ See, for example, the *Guardian*'s review of the book on November 7, 2010: “[The book] wouldn't get reviewed in national newspapers if it weren't for its author.” And see the *New York Times*' review of the documentary on November 18, 2010: “No network would devote an hour to Prince Charles's pet cause if the prince himself didn't participate.”

² Jemima Roberts, *The Ecologist*, Oct 21, 2010.

³ Interestingly when one looks beyond the skepticism of some in the mainstream media, the reviews on web sites like amazon.com, reflecting the views of individual readers, are generally overwhelmingly favorable toward the book.

The subtitle of *Harmony* is “A New Way of Looking at Our World.”⁴ Prince Charles clearly appreciates that a world view based on the timeless principles of harmony and transcendence is not a “new way”, but is rooted in ‘Tradition’ (as that term is understood by the readers of Sacred Web). Yet, this perspective is “new” to a world steeped in the ethos and ideology of Modernism.

Remarking on the “crisis of perception” that underlies the malaise of Modernism, Prince Charles comments as follows: “‘Right action’ cannot happen without ‘right thinking’ and in that truth lies the deeper purpose of this book.” The question then is: what is ‘right thinking’? The Prince correctly identifies the metaphysical roots of this epistemological question, and urges the reader to look beyond conventional science for answers:

Science can tell us how things work, but it is not equipped to tell us what they mean. That is the domain of philosophy and religion and spirituality.

‘Right thinking’ lies beyond “the straitjacket of the Modernist world view” which “has deliberately abstracted Nature” and made humanity “semi-detached bystanders, empirically correct spectators, rather than what the ancients understood us to be, which is participants in creation.” ‘Right thinking’ is to be found rather in “those universal principles that underpin the health of the natural world and keep life’s myriad diversity within the limits of Nature’s capacity.”

In the second chapter, titled “Nature”, Prince Charles narrates how Man has become disconnected from Nature, having largely abdicated a harmonious partnership with it in favor of a rapacious exploitation in the name of Progress. “Once respected as a sacred gift, the natural world is now more often treated as a mechanism that we can test to destruction.”

This section of the book appears to be a close collaboration between Prince Charles and, in particular, his co-author, Tony Juniper, and summarizes many environmental themes that have in modern times been covered by writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Al Gore, E. F. Schumacher, and Michael Pollan, to mention a few. Citing as examples the horrors of certain modern methods of animal farming, and the devastation caused by unsustainable fishing, Prince Charles reminds

⁴ There is also a 32 pages long, children’s edition of the book, adapted from the adult version, with the subtitle, “A Vision for our Future.”

the reader of the value of realizing “that our food is produced by a whole system, not just the isolated elements.” He criticizes an economic approach that focuses purely on GDP and that externalizes the tangible values of the world’s ecosystems and natural capital, as well as intangible values such as happiness and harmony. He argues that modernization and industrial ideologies that overly value economic efficiencies and profit have continued to undermine biodiversity and have deemphasized the responsibility of individuals and local communities for maintaining their own eco-systems. He strongly advocates that communities should accept responsibility for and stewardship of their environments and should reinvigorate more sustainable traditional approaches in regard to preservation of Nature and the bounties of the natural environment.

The Prince cautions, however, that “beyond a certain stage the relationship between increased growth and happiness starts to break down—and that point now appears to have been reached in many parts of the world, especially the richer ones.” Consumerism stimulates a desire for happiness but tries to ensure an ever-increasing cycle of wants. Relating the pressure for unhealthy growth and consumption to the false ideology of Modernism, Prince Charles observes,

...we are currently on course for a massive and rapid ecological decline... the reason we have ended up in this mess and why we are continuing to dig ourselves ever deeper into it, despite knowing all along that we are doing this, comes down to the way in which we have been persuaded to think and how we perceive the world.

In the third chapter, titled “The Golden Thread”, Prince Charles focuses on the “shared insights” of humanity, its universal Tradition of “those timeless principles of harmony, balance and unity” that constitute a “grammar of harmony”, connecting Heaven and Earth, and Man and Nature. He traces how this grammar of harmony is reflected in sacred symbols (such as the double *ouroboros* of infinity, or the *vesica*, symbolizing the wisdom-ark which is the isthmus between the human and the divine, or the *mandala*, symbolizing the universal mirroring of microcosm and the macrocosm) and in patterns used to define the aesthetics of the natural world (such as the basic shapes or variations of circle, triangle and square, and patterns founded on the Golden Mean, or the Fibonacci sequence). These symbols and patterns link proportion to harmony, and form the basis of traditional cosmology, as well as of traditional art and architecture (found, for example, in the designs of the magnificent

Gothic cathedrals of Christendom, such as Chartres, or of the mosques, tiles, gardens, and carpets of traditional Islam).

The basic thesis of this chapter is that there is a “cosmic geometry” that underlies the structure of matter and which forms the basis of its harmony. It is this sacred grammar that connects Heaven and Earth, the microcosm and the macrocosm, Man and Nature, and the natural world and God.

In the fourth chapter, titled “The Age of Disconnection”, Prince Charles proceeds to examine the influences that have contributed to Man’s disconnection from Nature. He focuses on how Renaissance humanism and the Lutheran Reformation “began a process of spiritual asset-stripping that has now eroded almost completely humanity’s former insight and wisdom as well as much of the balance that once shaped a very different perspective of the life we inhabit”.

Clarifying that he is not against science, but that he opposes scientism (“the *kind* of science that fails to see the whole picture; the kind of science that, because of the particular course it has taken, has eliminated the commonsense understanding of our interconnectedness with Nature and the realm beyond the material”), Prince Charles castigates the reductionism of a mechanistic science that atomizes the world, that reduces the organism to a mere machine instead of considering it in its wholeness—a wholeness which includes a spiritual context. He traces this reductionist tendency in the modern age to the Scientific Revolution and the so-called “Age of Enlightenment”. Contrary to the traditional world view of Man as spiritually connected to Nature through the divine principle—a perspective in which mind and matter were united by the spirit as “part of one living, conscious whole”—the Western worldview began to shift away from a participative conception of the universe. “God began to be defined as something that lay outside of creation and was separate from Nature and, as that happened, so Nature itself came to be seen more and more as an unpredictable force,” operating independently of God, so that, “with God separate from His Creation, humanity likewise became separate from Nature.” “As this mechanistic world view grew and, eventually, as industrialism took over, so Nature was reduced to what it is today: raw material.”

The book argues that by the 17th century, science and religion had undergone a schism (“the great divorce”), whereby the unified view of

Man and Nature as an interconnected “sacred web”—unified through an integrated ‘sense of being’ in which God was “the constant sacred presence that participated in the being of things”—came to be replaced by a scientific philosophy (promoted by modernist philosophies such as those of Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes) that separated mind from matter and removed God from the world. Nature became objectified. It was now viewed as inanimate, unconscious and mechanistic, rather than as pervaded by a unifying ‘sense of being.’ In the name of Reason, Nature became “nothing more than a great opportunity for experimentation and the supplier of natural resources.” This materialistic view of Nature, fed by the modernist philosophies of Hobbes, Mill, and Rousseau, promoted false notions of individualism and progress, both viewed in terms of Man’s dominion over the savage and mechanistic forces of the universe. The schism between Man and Nature created a modern age that was unmoored from its sense of being, without harmony and beauty, “a world of cold and separated utility”, driven by predominantly mercenary, materialistic forces.

By contrast with scientism that has contributed to this bleak outlook, and in keeping with the adage “The truth will out”, good science has provides humanity with a ray of hope. Modern science, particularly in the field of quantum physics, is rediscovering “that there is a deep-seated interconnectivity present at every level of the physical world.” Sir John Polkinghorne, for example, has described the universe as “a value-laden world in which there is a supreme source of value whose nature is reflected in all that is held in being,” and David Bohm has spoken of the universe in terms of an enfolded or “implicate order” in which reality, including consciousness, is “a coherent whole, which is never static or complete, but which is an unending process of movement and enfoldment.” These views of science remind us that, both in its core and at its cutting edge, physics is not far from metaphysics. There is room in science both for mystery and transcendence, and for a sacred relationship between Man and Nature. Prince Charles calls for us to make room for these qualities, and for a restoration of the traditional sense of harmony founded on “the spiritual perspective on life.”

The fifth chapter, titled “Renaissance”, explores solutions to the problems of disconnection, focusing in particular on farming and town planning—two areas in which Prince Charles is known to

have a great practical interest. He cites examples of successful contemporary methods of traditional farming, such as organic farming, emphasizing the virtues of partnership with Nature by nurturing and restoring it, respecting its diversity, and promoting sustainability and well-being. As well, the Prince passionately advocates the empowerment of local cultures and the use of local resources to build local farm economies.

The Prince's well-known interest in architecture stems from his concern about the well-being of people and the nature of their relationships, both to each other and to their environments. As such, his focus is not merely on the built forms of the environment, but on the communities themselves. Citing the example of the Indian slum of Dharavi, Prince Charles notes how the lack of physical assets such as power, water and sanitation, can be compensated for by "community capital". "Like Nature," he astutely observes, "communities thrive from the roots up, not the other way around."

The Prince's passionate opposition to soulless housing is also well known. It spurred his visionary creation in Poundbury (near Dorchester) of a successful 'walkable town' inspired by traditional principles of harmonious living. The town was built using traditional designs and construction methods and serves as "a counter-model to the prevailing Modernist paradigm."

The sixth chapter, titled "Foundations", contains valuable practical suggestions for moving forward into a healthy future, one that seeks to work with Nature and people, investing in both natural capital and community capital. Prince Charles identifies some of the foundational principles that could usher in a more harmonious future:

Perhaps now is really the moment to change our thinking, so that we can assess not only costs, but quality; to shift from our obsession with competitiveness and move towards durability and economic resilience; to measure sustainability as well as GDP and to elevate the emphasis on well-being rather than simply growth. Perhaps if we did this it would be possible to accelerate more rapidly our departure from the Age of Disconnection and to enter what could be our next historic phase: what we might call the Age of Harmony—certainly of Integration.

In the final chapter, titled "Relationship", Prince Charles reminds the reader that the restoration of harmony between Man and Nature will only be possible through a restoration of a spiritual vision, "understood

as the unifying principle of Nature, the sense in us of the underlying core of the universe, that which impels the unfolding of what is, in truth, an endless moment of creation." He argues that "To restore balance in the world, we must find the balance in *ourselves*." We would do well, he suggests, to reflect on the extent to which the din and distractions of the modern world may have diminished our receptivity to the signs of Nature, and how our emphasis on rational thinking may have eroded our trust in intuitive and natural feelings that may be vital to our survival and of the precious environment we share.

As a model for the restoration of the sacred balance and harmony in the post-modern world, Prince Charles turns to the pre-modern world and to primitive cultures. He notes the shared values of primitive peoples, who appreciate that "life is a web of interconnectedness", that Mother Earth is a living organism, and who "have a profound spiritual reverence for the Earth." He observes:

...they all see themselves in communion with what might be called 'the underlying intelligence of being', which bestows upon them the responsibility to safeguard the harmony and connectedness of all life. Through their role as stewards of the world they have a spiritual relationship with Nature. This means they inhabit the world from the inside out. They take care to maintain the inner harmony they perceive within themselves, which they contend means that the balance in things will be maintained in the outer, material realm. If they fail to do this, all of these age-old cultures predict, there will be discord and the Mother's sources of nourishment will dry up.

The Prince stresses that according to primitive cultures and traditional civilizations, it is a universally accepted principle that the source of harmony is transcendent:

In all cases, the essence of life is considered to be a mysterious, benign, sustaining force that seeks expression through its 'actualization' in the material world. This force lies at the core of life and it is perfectly natural that we should seek communion with it because we are very much a part of it.

According to the Traditional world view, "consciousness gives rise to matter, not the other way around". Man and Nature live within the sacred embrace that the Australian Aboriginals have called "Dreamtime"—the Source that gives the world its presence, and that connects all creatures, as it connects Man to Nature and Earth to Heaven.

By ignoring this Source—by breaking the link between Man and Nature—humanity risks destroying the Earth that sustains us, and our spiritual lifeline:

The destruction of Nature is ultimately the destruction of our own inner being and it is this inner destruction that, if not checked, will lead to yet more destruction of vast numbers of species of animals and plants. It is a vicious circle that grinds away at human well-being.

The remedy for this destructive ethos is to recognize the timeless principle “that no one part can grow well and true without it relating to—and being in accordance with—the well-being of the whole”. This recognition of the principle of harmony is central to the meaning of our existence:

...we are born into a universe that has meaning and purpose. All of the sacred traditions tell us that this ‘purpose’ is for life to know itself—this is the meaning of communion, by which we sense and help maintain life’s essential balance.

The book concludes with an urgent plea for harmony, noting that “...we stand at an historic moment. We face a future where there is a real prospect that if we fail Earth, we fail humanity.” One can only hope that this eloquent plea for spiritual restoration and harmony, coming as it does from someone who has an international stature and a voice that commands attention, will indeed be heard. We are truly fortunate that His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales is a champion in our times for this cause.