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Having achieved an international best seller with his *When Corporations Rule the World*, David Korten is well placed to write a book of this nature. He began to write it as a result of observations and reflections garnered while working on development projects in poor countries, as an activist in various NGOs, and as a member of the drafting team for the Earth Charter.

Korten builds his argument around a fundamental distinction between two kinds of outlook or practical stance towards the world: 'Empire' and 'Earth Community'. Empire is a Hobbesian or Nietzschean worldview in which life is competitive, masculine,
individualistic, and power-hungry, while Earth Community stresses cooperation, partnership, the growth of human potential, and the feminine sides of life. Korten insists that we all have the existential capacity to choose the stance of Earth Community. He argues for this claim by using models of psychological development to show that what is required for Earth Community is a degree of maturity, while the Empire model is grounded in immature forms of human existence. Empire appropriates the world’s resources for the creation of wealth which it then also appropriates to itself. This causes both the depletion of the world’s resources evidenced by such phenomena as global warming, the peaking of oil production, and the exploitation of labour resources in the developing world, and also the concentration of the wealth produced by these exploitative practices into the hands of ever fewer owners and multinational corporations.

The next sections of the book explore the history of Empire both as a world phenomenon and as instantiated in the USA. Korten goes on to explain how Empire uses ideology to sustain itself with three stories relating to prosperity, security, and meaning. The prosperity story is the ideology of neo-liberalism; the security story is that of realism in international relations with a stress on the evils of foreign powers and agents; while the meaning story comes in two versions. This first is the biblical version which speaks of Divine creation and a destiny of hierarchy blessed by God. The second is the secular version in which matter is the only reality and the survival of the fittest decrees that states must maintain strength against all comers. These stories make the violence of Empire seem natural and inevitable. Korten rejects these stories, and puts forward his own story to undergird Earth Community. He finds a new vision not only in contemporary physics, with its rejection of atomism in favour of relational structures, but, most importantly, in biology, with its vision of life, not as competitive but as cooperative and symbiotic. Accordingly, Korten presents a metaphysical theory of reality itself: a theory which attributes teleology to creation and thus posits a spiritual calling to each of us to ‘cooperate’ with the purposes of nature.

As he puts it:

The turning from Empire to Earth Community has two primary elements. First is a turning from money to life as our defining value. Second is a turning from relations of domination to relations of partnership based on organizing principles discerned from the study of healthy living systems. (295)

Lest it be thought that these prescriptions are too general and vague, part five discusses goals and strategies for progressive change. Amongst the goals is the complete elimination of social and political hierarchy – a goal that is said to be viable because it echoes the biological structure of life itself. Fortunately, the strategies are a bit more realistic. They focus on global civil society and on non-violent resistance through street protests and the like. Korten points to grassroots movements, trends, and organisations working for economic and political change, but he gives priority to cultural politics aimed at the Great Turning from the thinking of Empire to the thinking of Earth Community:

The basic framework for the work of birthing Earth Community is simple: make the life-affirming values of Earth Community the values of the prevailing culture; renew the democratic experiment to restore to people, families, and communities the power to give expression to those values; and do it all on a global scale. (341)

What are we to make of this uplifting thesis? The diagnosis that Korten offers us of the world’s ills and of the role of the US in those ills, is both scathing and convincing. But the problem with the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis is that Korten is, in effect, giving us a religious worldview. He is calling upon us all to undergo a kind of conversion which involves accepting a metaphysics that attributes intelligence and purpose to creation itself and thus to human life. He preaches a morality which promises a secular salvation in the form the Great Turning towards a global community of peace and harmony. Whether or not this millenarian picture provides false hope or consolation in the face of suffering in the way that religions do, it certainly divides humanity into those who are righteous and those who are evil: those who work towards Earth Community and those who support Empire. Whether a viable political movement for progressive social change can be built upon such a polarised and elitist view of society is a question the book leaves unanswered.

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