

# Child Cosmology

(in which the origin of the *Book of the Wake People* is revealed, a new scientific discipline sees the light and the world is disenchanted)

*for Frederiekje*

When my eldest daughter was age five, she asked one day, ‘Daddy, what’s the outside world?’ I replied that it was just a word for the world outside the house, the world out there, the outside world. She did not like that. ‘Papa,’ she called me to order, ‘I mean the world outside of the world.’ I looked at my wife for a moment, who gave me a hint by nodding her head explicitly (‘yes, that’s what she means’) and then I understood: she meant the universe. I was a bit surprised and above all intrigued. A very small child poses a very big question. The question. The first question, the question about the first: what the hell is that thing we live in and that we call the world, and then... what about that world outside the world. Indeed.

I started explaining everything I knew about the universe as well as I could. I started about the earth and sun and the planets and stars and galaxies and about the Milky Way, about black holes even... It went from bad to worse. When I arrived at the Big Bang, she gave up. She would explain to me how it was. What I heard was nothing less than a worldview, an infantile alternative universe. Truly, it became a real Genesis, a cosmology, a childlike map of the universe. I recorded her story from her mouth as an amateur anthropologist as literally as possible, in various sessions. It became a real book: *Wakkere Mens in de Buitenwereld* (Awakened Human in the Outer World). Colloquially (especially inside our house) also known as *Het wakkermensenboek* (The book of Wake People).

The first lines of this book Genesis sound like this:

*The Breath comes from the Outside World.  
The Outside World is everything outside the world.  
The awakened human grows in the Outside World.  
And through the Death Spot he comes to earth.  
Otherwise he will not grow and he will not progress.  
The Awake People make the earth.  
But I am not of that kind.*

*I came too late.  
The earth was already there.*

Like all mythology, Frederiekje’s Genesis begins with the principle of life, the breath, the primordial blowing, the unmoved respiration, that is, the breath before there was inhaling, the first fleeting version of what was later petrified into spirit. The second verse reveals a sober look, it sounds a bit like Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: ‘the world is all that is the case’. Equally logical and equally tautological: the outer world is everything that falls outside the world: outer space as the Great Outdoors. And then appears swiftly Man, primordial Man, the true human being, the human being who is mythical: the Waking Man, the Man of Wake, the great awakener. The demigods who made the earth, the ancestors who turned the earth into the world. What an illumination! Quite transparent indeed (like more illuminations): a child of five who does not like to go to sleep is... an awakened human. Yes, yes, very well done. And now go to sleep. On closer inspection, indeed a possible species in itself, one with mythical allures. An ideal. A utopia too. Presence of mind as a characteristic: not only the language is what distinguishes Man from other mammals, but especially his wakefulness, his lucidity, the possibility to reflect, about the outer world for example.

In verse four the unusual of that Outer World is clarified: the one heaven is not the other, in other words, next to the heavenly vault there is also the afterlife. In this case, the ‘before life’. Because—and this is indeed astute: where we go after death, this has kept human-kind busy since ages, but in most myths and certainly in the monotheistic cosmogony, the question of where we come from, where we were before birth never became a well-developed theory, not a strong story. For this you will have to look at reincarnation and karma and all that jazz. For a five-year-old, however, this is still very recent: where was I before I woke up in the world? Good

question. Now, the easiest way is to contaminate unanswerable questions with existing answers—not just in the sense of contamination but also in the sense of contracting—: so...the Herefore and the Hereafter coincide. This is also the case in *The Book of the Wake People*. And logically speaking there is something to be said for this (although it inevitably smells like reincarnation).

The life principle (the breath) is put in a spatial scheme, in a geometry with death (can hardly be otherwise): the outside world is connected to the inner world via the Death Spot, which is at the same time the Birth Place. Primitive cosmologies always involve an all-embracing (albeit often fragmentary) diagram, a scheme of the universe, a cartography of the world. For example, the tree of life of the Edda epic with a serpent at its roots and an eagle at its crown, was nothing less than the whole cosmos, the drawing for the entire dialectic of forces based on the basic scheme of the upper world, the world and the underworld. And that is not different in *Het Wakkeremensenboek*. It is a coaster sketch of the universe. Be it that the world geography of a five-year old is rather loosely put together:

*Above the death spot is the Big Square.  
The Little Square there, people can go through,  
but because of the big Square  
only the Waking People can.  
In the middle is the Globe, with all clouds around it.  
The clouds are houses for Awake People on earth.  
Just above the clouds is the Death Spot.  
And all the way to the end of the world are  
the magic globes.  
And they are all in a very large sphere.  
You can never go outside.  
And that sphere is in a square.  
And you can go through that but people dare not.  
Because there is everything that is dangerous: lions,  
wolves and even ghosts and dragons...  
The Woken People come from the first world.  
The creeps come from the last world...*

She has also drawn this cosmic scheme on a number of occasions—on large pages we let her draw the outer world. The primal version of this ground plan of the universe is taken as the starting point in the *Woken Man Book* dialogues. It is built, as with any mythology, not just an abstract mental scheme but also with fragments of concrete experience, bits and pieces reality. For example, the Death Spot: that is the grave of my father. In one of the basic drawings I asked her what those things were at the very top of her drawing. She replied: ‘These are vases and those little balls are flowers. Vases for death.’ That was enlightening. The funeral of my father was still fresh in the memory. For her the grave of my father must have looked something like the entrance to the realm of the dead, and she swiftly gives this a literal and figurative place in her private mythology: the cosmological place of death.

The Death Spot is clearly the navel of the world, which not only gives access to the underworld but also opens

up the Middle World and even gives access to the Upper World. The outer world is at the same time above and underworld, paradise and hell, heaven and purgatory, limbo of life and hereafter. It is through this navel that the Awakened People’s Children come to life. Here we encounter an interpretational difficulty: do the Awake People have to grow through the death spot and move forward, or vice versa: do they have to get out of the place of death and move forward? We do not get an answer about that, but it is a theological dispute that is reminiscent of Plato’s ‘mythology’: are we homesick for the world of ideas (are we trapped in the shadow world)? Or were we trapped in the world of ideas and are we here to free ourselves through insight (which must use the memory of the world of ideas)? All mythologies are full of analogous ambiguities. It is also fundamentally undecided and undecidable: is eternal life the real life or does perishable life really matter and is heaven, with the words of David Byrne, the place where nothing ever happens?

But, however shadowy the place of death, it should be clear that in the children’s mythology of my eldest daughter the first people are demigods: they make the world. As is clear from verses 6 to 9 of the above-quoted beginning of the genesis (‘*The Awake People make the earth / but I am not of that kind / I have come too late. / The earth was already there.*’), only the distant ancestors, the demigods, just like in any mythology, have made the world what it is. We, the descendants, arrive late, we imitate what was already there.

And then the author soon comes to the genesis of ordinary people: ‘*Awake People first have wings, / in the outer world, they are still translucent. / And then they let themselves be made completely / human by the heart.*’ Again very Platonic, Christian and almost Cartesian: the spirit is transparent, the body heavy with blood. You have to lose your translucence and volatility (and thus your wings) to become a body. But that incarnation is also warm and beating, hearty, cordial and merciful.

Evil is of course also given a place in the geometry of everything (as we already saw in passing):

*Those globes, those red globes are / the red eyes of the  
creepy things. / —As? / —Just the creeps / —Give me  
the names of all the creeps. / —Dragons, and bats,  
almost everything, ghosts, monsters—monsters always  
have red eyes—wolves, ... / —Are they just wolves  
in the outside world?—No, werewolves... Because  
ordinary wolves / cannot fly. Werewolves can fly. /  
And they must be able to fly, otherwise they do not exist  
in the outside world. / Actually, everything exists in the  
outer world, as long as it can fly.*

This quote makes it clear how all animistic forces must be located. There must be room for the pandemonium: the Outside World is also a panorama of demons. Further on in the text are also the good places discussed, but we leave them aside because they prove less exciting (‘This can’t be a coincidence...’).

This is the coaster of the Whole outlined. The Hole where’re in. Then details come to the fore. I give a few

examples. 'Mature Awake People have a third eye / and with that they can look right / in the heart of the people.' (...) Do you have a third eye? You should never say that about yourself, because then you lose your third eye.' Shamanistic. I do not know where she got that. But also very wise: he who prides himself on his wisdom and knowledge of people testifies to stupidity. Sometimes it sounds apodictic and decisive. When I asked whether 'Wakkere Mensen' [the only good term, untranslatable in English unfortunately] were built differently from sleepwalkers, she replied: 'We are not built, we are born.'

The outside world is, of course, also a piece of paradise:

*But Awake People do not need money. / Because they just grab the clouds. Because that cloud is always growing. / They just get rid of their house, that is always growing. /—What do they get from their houses? /—Cloudiguiness[ Wolks!]/ They make cloud juice from it / And they can drink it / Cloud food, you do not have to do anything for it anymore. / It is ready in no time.*

Literally, in her imagination, she constructs not only a world building, but also and above all an air castle, a Land of Plenty in the clouds. A floating utopia, reminiscent of Plato's Atlantis and especially Laputa, the floating island of Swift. According to Mircea Eliade, the myths for the living people are living myths, which they repeat in daily life: they hunt, build, eat, sit like the ancestors, the first mythical people, taught them. These are the true stories ('*histories vraies*'), and they can only be told to the initiates, to the men and the boys who become men. In addition, there are untrue stories ('*histories fausses*'), which are told for entertainment, also to the women and children. In Het *Wakkeremensenboek*, this distinction is less clear, the book settles on the transition between cosmogony and fairy tale world. It is the latter who dominates the rest of the book—not surprisingly: a child of five is bombed with fairy tales and Frederiekje was particularly eager for stories. The rest of the text is an elaboration of this basic diagram on the basis of my questions. You feel in the book, that it is not always easy to satisfy that daddy's amateur anthropologist with all his questions and you feel that she has to come up with a lot on the spot. A coaster of the universe is not yet a story cycle. Certainly when it comes to the language of the Waking Men, she falls, so to speak, through the basket. She only invented sound clusters. But the end is unparalleled:

*Do you know why I actually came here?  
Because I did not like cloud juice.*

Immensely funny, right? (or immensely sad, for that matter). And again autobiographical: my eldest daughter barely liked anything. But also very universal. Paradise is not livable for us: too perfect, too boring, inedible. Give us that delicious, earthy, digestible, ephemeral world: the lusty life. (Or is it the amateur anthropologist who suddenly goes autobio?...)

When I had a book performance a while later, Frederiekje protested. I remember well: she was in the

bath. She said wronged: 'And my book then?' Archetypal snapshot in my memory: annoyed writer sobs on the misunderstanding of the world in her bath. But then as a film role with brio played by a child of... eight now. I immediately challenged her. 'Do you dare read a piece of your book on my book presentation?' And yes, she has taken up the gauntlet. In the stately salon of the Brussels city library, introduced by Sigrid Bousset, the later director of the Passa Porta who introduced my poetry collection and in the presence of publisher Henk Hoeks from the publisher Sun, who introduced my Benjamin book, she did her first reading. The success was of course ensured. Everyone charmed and also a bit impressed, because the reader will also have been able to determine that this *Wakkeremensenboek* is not an everyday document. The aforementioned Mr. Hoeks, the great publisher (also literally an impressive figure), even officially gave her his visit card and said very sincerely that he was very interested in publishing her book.

The project to make the original text into a real book was technically not so obvious, after all it was a relatively short text and should you then overload it with comments? And then the drawings, essential, but not really graphic masterpieces, schematics just, with blue and red marker—fascinating, and all that, but... What prevented us (my wife and I) from implementing this project is that we did not want to push our oldest daughter in the role of child prodigy, of a wonder child. Or worse: of a weird child. (Awake Humanoid who does not like cloud juice and has fallen down through the death spot is also... food for psychologists...). For her twelfth birthday we have bundled her writings into a photocopied booklet that has been cherished here in the house ever since.

But all this is not just about my eldest daughter. It is about a possible discovery: that every child makes an image of the world very early. It could be nothing less than a new discipline; the cartography of an unknown, as yet uncharted continent: *child cosmology* or broader child mythology. To be studied by a whole bunch of pediatric anthropologists; yes, the anthropology of the infantile would in no time make us forget child psychology and make it disappear as an obsolete discipline in the folds of history. I exaggerate, but you know what I mean.

Of course, some children's books made by adults contain echoes of that kind of child cosmology. Just like whole pieces of 'real mythology' contain a reminder of the infantile world view. Think of the lightning as an attribute of the enraged supreme god (both with Wodan, who is already angry by name, as with Zeus): beautiful but a very infantile explanation of a natural phenomenon. In short, child cosmology is universal. Every child lives fundamentally in a mythological world, it can not help but to make an image of the world prematurely. This could provide us with a new definition of mythology: a premature picture of the world, a first sketch. More or less coherent, but because of too many indefinable parameters, like the lightning for example, based on fantasy. This metaphor, this 'infantilisation' of mythology can be dangerous: the mythical peoples are children and we may approach them patronizingly,

civilize, denigrate, expropriate, oppress, abuse or enslave, if we really have to, put prizes on them, scalp them, exterminate them, ... Dangerous. Unfortunate. So pay attention with child cosmology as a discipline: do not make a biosociology of it. No social Darwinism (which quickly degenerated into racial theory). But. No lamenting or nostalgia or postcolonial anthropology can help here: mythology must be seen as fiction and thus, its spell must be broken. To give it a new enchantment: that of the story.

Hence the eternal, legitimate demand for enlightenment. *Entmythologisierung!* Disenchantment as a command: dare to know! Pierce the fairy tales of cardboard cartoons. Get rid of the creeps! The red globes in the sky are not the eyes of monsters but just clumps of matter in the void ...

Now another scene comes to my mind. One day—she was ten at the time, I think—Frederickje asks me reproachingly why I do not believe in God. I swallow for a moment and start smiling, stroke over my unshaven chin and say: ‘This is serious, let’s sit down for a minute.’ And, sitting in front of the fire in the saloon, that’s is how I remember it,

I explain that no real things exist without a body, no substances are real that have no matter. ‘Everything that really exists is material, tangible, everything that exists you can touch. What you can not touch does not exist. Even air and light are matter. Pure spiritual things do not exist. They only exist in stories, such as ghosts, spooks, gnomes, Sinterklaas, ...—and therefore also God. All stories. No real existing things. And no problem, otherwise it would spook in our lives, and you actually know that it does not. So, no miracles, no magic. No punishment from God.

She must have felt it was obvious. And lo and behold: she lost her faith on the spot. Disenchantment can be very simple. ... Many people cannot live with it. Some cannot even laugh about it. Well!? I think it’s delicious. *Magic of disenchantment...* I sign. Get rid of all that mythology! As it was written, in an old verse (from *De Oorsprongen, of Het boek der verbazing*):

*The world is revealing itself  
as nothing else than this:  
a masked ball in a hell hole  
of a Whole.*