

The Sustaining Cosmos

Jonathan Jones

Jonathan Jones is an international commercial lawyer. In his time in the multinational world, including at ICI and Inchcape, he specialised in developing businesses in emerging markets, working in China, Russia, India, South-East Asia, and much of Latin America as well as doing business in Europe, the US, Africa, and the Middle East. He contributed to the setting up of The Economist's Emerging Markets Unit and has spoken on commercial legal issues in many countries. Most recently, Jonathan also worked in the NGO world for seven years on numerous substantial development projects in Africa and Asia, with Save the Children and Comic Relief. Jonathan is a keen student, writer, and speaker on history and archaeology and holds an MA in Cultural Cosmology. He is currently writing a book on humanity's economic connections with the cosmos from early times to the current day.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1.5.167–68), Hamlet to Horatio.

It has been my good fortune during my professional and personal life to have visited and worked in many countries around the world and to have learned to understand and embrace their cultures. I made it a point when conducting negotiations in a new country not just to understand the legal and commercial situations but to try to understand the people, customs, politics, history, and language, including body language. When an Indian nods her head as you are saying something, it does not mean that she agrees with you—she is being polite. When an Englishman smiles and says he is not entirely happy with a situation, it does not mean that it is mainly acceptable—it probably means that he does not like it at all.

My fascination with different cultures led to a growing realisation of the importance of two things: opening one's mind to understand the point of view of a person from another land; and explaining one's own background and position clearly. Failure to do these things often leads to conflict that can be avoided. At a sticking point in a negotiation in Moscow with a successful businessman brought up in Soviet times, I asked him to listen to my explanation of how I was thinking about the issue. I also asked him to explain how he was thinking. By being honest and open about our goals, with me as a representative of a Western multinational and my Russian counterpart with his particular cultural background, suspicions were alleviated and we resolved the problem.

Alongside my work in the law and business, I have retained a lifelong interest in history and archaeology. I completed an MA at the University of Wales in Cultural Cosmology a few years ago. My fascination for the world of commerce and trade led me to write my dissertation on the connection between trading and investing practice—on Wall Street and the City of London—and the study of cosmic cyclical patterns—as practised since earliest times up to and including the current day. Since I was a teenage archaeologist in the 1970s there has been a revolutionary improvement in the technology available to study the past. Carbon dating, geophysics,

DNA analysis, and many other innovations have extended our knowledge of the longevity of human history and of the thought processes that different cultures have used to sustain and improve their ways of life. My own research has taken me back to a period beyond Neolithic times to our prehistory as hunter-gatherers. Small bands of humans roamed their section of the Earth in search of animal prey for meat, skins, materials for weapons, and other crops to consume, including berries and wild wheat. Gradually individuals, or small groups of individuals—probably the tribal shamans—began to take note of the timing of the changing seasons, and of how the mysterious comings and goings of the Sun and the Moon and other bright bodies in the night sky seemed to have some connection with those seasons. Knowing the timing of the annual migrations of herds of deer and bison, and of the fruitfulness of wild crops, was a matter of basic survival. Shamans became key advisers to tribal leaders and to their tribes themselves. They would have played a key part in developing their cultures' views of the Universe and burgeoning religious practices.

The global population of mankind was less than one million, as opposed to the 7.5 billion we now have, which is rising. Many millennia would have passed as populations increased and the daily and monthly and annual cycles of the Sun, Moon, planets, and brighter constellations were better understood and applied to the economic business of daily life. The farming revolution of the Neolithic period led to greater efficiency in the production of calories, substantial growth in populations, and concentrations into settled villages and towns, with hierarchies of power and increased job specialisation. Shamans became priests, and in Egypt and Babylonia combined their religious function with observing and recording the cosmos and advising the kings on how to deal with them.

The reappearance to ancient Egypt of the star Sirius in the heavens meant the flooding of the Nile, which was central to the wellbeing of all Egypt. The Babylonians instigated hundreds of years of record keeping on heavenly movements in a long-term experiment that linked those movements to the prices of their key six commodities. They produced a database that priestly compilers could refer to over centuries as they advised their rulers on the stabilisation of the state. The project was logical and empirical. If the price of barley

was high when certain Solar, Lunar, or planetary configurations were in place, then that price would be recorded and checked again when similar cosmic conditions were in place. Done over a very long period of time, patterns and cycles may begin to emerge, with a working predictive system of price and product availability to use in the administration of the state.

By the time we reach Greece we have an example given by Aristotle of the use of this kind of knowledge for financial speculation. He tells us that the pre-Socratic philosopher Thales used knowledge of the likely condition of the annual olive crop to purchase options on olive oil presses for the upcoming year. When a bumper crop duly arrived and demand for the presses rose, he profited mightily from his prescience. Today he would be working in the global commodity markets with Philosophy as his first degree!

As trade increased, so did travel. Long-distance travellers across the world, especially travellers by sea, learned to navigate by the stars to help them brave the dangers of ocean sailing. We might think of Homer's Bronze Age Greeks sailing to Troy, or the Polynesians navigating vast distances in the Pacific, or Captain Cook on his voyages to Australia. For all, the ability to navigate by the stars was important for ocean travel and commerce.

I have had numerous encounters with businesspeople involved in the study of cultural and economic astronomy and its application to business cycles and the stock markets. They have confirmed to me that practices that first arose in antiquity in this field have been developed substantially in the last two hundred years. Such practices are taken seriously and used by major players in the business world and in the markets. I am fortunate to have friendships with consultants who advise clients across the globe in this field.

Out of the growing practice of empirical cosmology emerged astrology. The first horoscope dates to around 410 BCE, at the time of the Persian Empire. The idea was that individual people could have a character and predictable destiny arising from a birth chart reflected in the heavens. This idea was developed alongside the more mundane activity of matching cosmic cycles to economic activity. Astrology is maligned both by science and the Church as nonsensical or heretical, and is confused with the newspaper version. And yet for much of the last three millennia it has been studied alongside astronomy, and been taken seriously in politics and the financial world. In many of the cultures of Asia, especially in the Indian subcontinent, it continues to thrive, and I have encountered its use in business transactions in India and Egypt. The Supreme Court of India has described it as a science in recent years. I have got to know the underlying traditions and hidden methodologies of cultures in emerging markets. This has helped me understand that our current way of thinking in the West can be matched by subtle and equally effective thought systems elsewhere in the world, especially in Asia.

For the last 40 years, since the creation of the personal computer and then of the Internet, electronic gaming, and social media, large sections of the human race have spent their days staring downwards, fixated on their computer screens and iPhones. We have forgotten to look around us at nature and above us at the skies. We have instead immersed ourselves in an artificial world of electronic technology that can separate us from our links with the cosmos and its cycles. As we contemplate and attempt to address the environmental and social consequences of this way of living, the COVID-19 pandemic has at least given us a chance to slow down,

think about our relationship with nature and the rhythms of the cosmos and the natural world, and seek to again understand and realign ourselves with those rhythms before it is too late.

The Dark Skies movement originated in Arizona and is now growing rapidly worldwide, alongside such phenomena as rewilding. It aims to reassert humanity's birthright to observe clear night skies free from the light pollution that damages our health and sense of being part of a wider Universe. Observing the majesty of the cosmos at night and imbibing the rhythms of nature will hopefully encourage us to treat our planet with more respect as we go about our daily business of earning a living.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned the understanding I developed in my work in emerging and developing markets of other cultures—understanding of how they thought and operated—and how important this was to my ventures. Similarly, I have come to understand the thought systems developed by many cultures around the world relating to cosmic cycles and the workings of nature. This has broadened my thinking about the intelligence of our ancestors, the hidden power in ancient systems of thought, and how we might use this reconnection with the natural world and the workings of the Universe to our advantage in the future life of humanity.