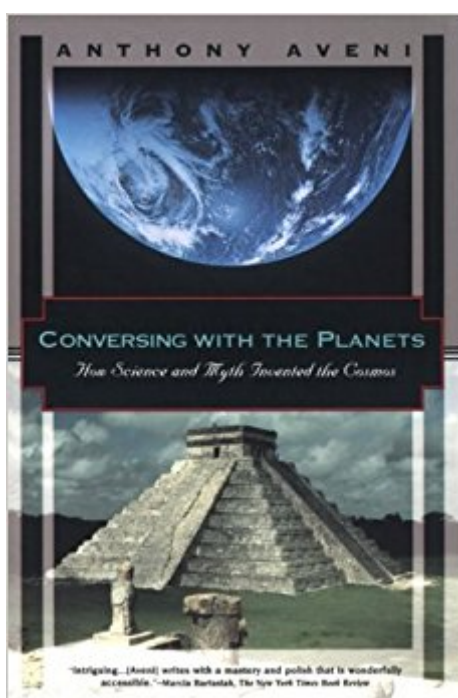


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# Conversing With The Planets: How Science And Myth Invented The Cosmos (Kodansha Globe)



## Synopsis

*Conversing with the Planets* is the first popular work of astronomical anthropology, a field pioneered by Anthony Aveni, who has taught anthropology and astronomy at Colgate University for over twenty-five years. It interweaves the astronomy, mythology, and anthropology of ancient cultures by showing how to discover the harmony between their beliefs and their study of the sky. Modern scientists often dismiss the scientific contributions of archaic astronomers because earlier cultures wove their observations into elaborate, often weird - by our standards - mythologies about living planetary deities. The ancients spoke to the planets, and they believed the planets talked back. Aveni urges us to reconsider their discoveries and asks us to set aside for a while the ideas that our modern, technology-based astronomy has given to us about the sun, moon, and planets, in order to look at these celestial bodies through ancient eyes. Focusing on the belief systems of the Mayans, Babylonians, Chinese, and other cultures from antiquity through the Renaissance to the present, Aveni argues that we cannot separate the scientific contributions from the cultures that gave rise to them. Aveni's reexamination, based on in-depth anthropological studies, including the decoding of old Mayan and Babylonian texts, reveals that the ancients were far from the misguided, superstitious characters we now consider them to be. They were, in fact, deeply attuned to the motion of the sun, moon, and planets, and they used their naked-eye observations to create not only intricate astrologies and mythologies - in particular, those revolving around Venus - but also extremely accurate records and projections of meteorological phenomena. *Conversing with the Planets* asks that we reattune ourselves to the intersection of science, culture, and mythology and acknowledge that there is no such thing as an "absolute truth" about the natural world; every scientific discovery, whether made in 2000 B.C. or A.D., is true only for the culture of its time, its current beliefs and mores. Our scientific truth is defined by who we are and what we believe in. What have we moderns lost by turning our attention to the cold eye of the telescope, away from the natural harmonies of planet and sky? Why have we silenced the dialogue between observers and the sky? Aveni teaches us a new appreciation of the science of the past and affirms that our ancestors' discoveries provide a rich well of knowledge that modern-day science can and must draw upon.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Aveni, a professor of astronomy and anthropology at Colgate University, seeks here to integrate--in his view, reintegrate--the rational universe with a more comforting model that takes into account "the interrelationship between matter and spirit." Such ancient astronomically inclined peoples as the Babylonians and the Mayans, he argues, made direct connections between events in the night sky and those on earth, and hence between nature and culture. The Mayans, for example, used their observations of the path of Venus to create a culturally useful myth about planting. While attempting "to dispel some of the misconceptions we have about our ancient predecessors," Aveni the anthropologist ( *Empires of Time* ) leads Aveni the astronomer ( *The Sky in Mayan Literature* ) into giving these ancient pre-scientists what seems like more credit than is their due. In the end, his thesis spins out of orbit into deep New Age space; for a more balanced work of comparative astronomy, see E. C. Krupp's *Beyond the Blue Horizon* . Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Aveni, a specialist in the interconnection between anthropology and astronomy who teaches at Colgate University, devotes much of his attention in this book to ancient astrology, especially that of the Mayans and the peoples of the Middle East. He emphasizes that the way they viewed the sky was closely integrated with their religious beliefs and with the structure of their societies. He pleads for an understanding of their astrological systems that takes into account their context and that does not insist upon applying modern criteria for scientific work. Unfortunately, the last few pages of the book contain a superficial pastiche of current antiscientific fads, which does little to support the main thesis of the volume. Recommended with some reservations.- Jack W. Weigel, Univ. of Michigan

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A brilliant book! Aveni draws you deep into history, researching a variety of cultures and their views on the planets and what they meant to the peoples of those ages. He does this not so much in the way of a history lesson, but with a passion for who those people were, and to show that they weren't so dumb or barbaric as they are so often labeled. Instead of doing what we modern humans do, researching just for the sake of knowledge, finding the laws that govern the universe, and thinking that our way is the only way, Aveni shows these old cultures watching the planets and using them to tie into their natural surroundings. He then goes on to show the slow changes in human consciousness as we slowly started seeing ourselves not as a part of the natural world, but something alone and separate from our surroundings, slowly destroying our spiritual connection with the physical world. Looking at the world we live in and how we relate to it, one can see that the change hasn't been total though. We still base most of our calendar systems upon ancient observations, such as our years being based upon our circling the Sun, and our months are still (loosely) based on the moon doing the same with our own Earth. Even our days of the week still show the names of celestial objects. Sunday obviously is named after our very own star, while Monday is derived from the moon. Harder to see (at least for English speaking people) is Tuesday, from the Nordic word for Mars, Tiw. Wednesday comes from Woden, another name for Mercury, while Thursday is from Thor, or Jupiter. Friday or Fria, is our Venus, and finally Saturday is much easier to see as Saturn. The last chapter is more of a call to go back to our roots, at least in the sense of exploring the universe with a wonder and sense of awe that is more than just cold and scientific. Aveni seems to have a strong sense of purpose with his ideas, and this flows beautifully through the pages. To finish, if you have any inclinations towards astronomy, astrology, or archeology, then this book is a must read for you.

In this articulate work, Aveni tries to show that the way people live has profoundly affected the way they create their understanding of the natural world, particularly the sky. Arguing that knowing the sky has always been important, he cites examples of how several ancient societies perceived the heavens, particularly in Mesoamerica and the Near East. Aveni, an expert on ancient astronomy, warns against believing that any ways other than our own of understanding and explaining nature have no value. In effect, he questions the primacy of the modern scientific method. Aveni seems to agree with those who suggest that there may be many answers, each valid in an appropriately

understood framework, to the question of how nature works. Many readers may find this perspective too relativist or New Age. Dare one say politically correct? The book includes black and white illustrations.

The book is great for one who is looking to learn a little astronomy, ancient history (Mayan, Babylonian, etc.), and ancient polytheistic religion. Furthermore, the book dwells on how the ancient people's customs, religion, and astronomy all tremendously interrelated. Any high school level reader can read, understand, and enjoy the book. However, even a person, who has multiple university degrees, can find this book intriguing.

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