

The Christification of the Universe

Sunday, November 6, 2016

The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. —John 6:51

Jesus the Christ did not talk in this truly shocking way (see John 6:60) so we could worship bread and wine. He came so that we would recognize his presence in all things, not just in the human body of Jesus, not just in the human body of God's people (1 Corinthians 12:12ff), but even in the nurturing elements of the earth, symbolized by the ubiquitous food of bread and wine (1 Corinthians 11:23ff), and therefore to the very edges of creation (Romans 8:19). The mystery that was made personal and specific in Jesus was revealed as the shape of the entire universe. [1] What else could the universe be but "the body of God"? Think about it. The Incarnate One is the stand-in for "everything in heaven and everything on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). This is not a competing religious statement as much as a highly symbolic metaphysical plan "from the beginning," "from the foundation of the world" (see Ephesians 1).

God is not just saving people; God is saving all of creation. It is all "Real Presence." We could call it the primordial "Christification" or anointing of the universe at Creation. This is not pantheism (God is everything), but panentheism (God is in everything!). Such a central message of cosmic incarnation was never seriously taught in the Western, overly individualistic church, except by a few like Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), and Bonaventure (1221-1274). It was much more common in the Eastern Church, especially in early scholars and mystics like Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and Symeon the New Theologian.

Inspired by the more contemporary mystic scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Franciscan sister and scientist Ilia Delio writes:

Christ invests himself organically within all creation, immersing himself in things, in the heart of matter, and thus unifying the world. The universe is physically impregnated to the very core of its matter by the influence of his superhuman nature. Everything is physically “christified,” gathered up by the incarnate Word as nourishment that assimilates, transforms, and divinizes. [2]

From the way we treat the planet, other humans, and sometimes even ourselves, it seems we don't understand or really believe this. When you don't recognize that the Christ Mystery is universal, that God is present in—and is saving—all of creation, you can choose what you respect and what you disrespect, what you love and what you hate. The full Gospel takes away from you any power to decide and discriminate where God is and where God isn't. The old Baltimore Catechism answered the sixteenth question, “Where is God?” quite clearly: “God is everywhere.” But we never really believed it!

References:

[1] See the last two weeks of meditations on the Cosmic Christ, beginning with October 23, 2016.

[2] Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Orbis Books: 2013), 79.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, “The Christification of the Universe,” a homily at Holy Family Parish, August 16, 2015, Center for Action and Contemplation, <https://cac.org/christification-of-the-universe/>.

Infinite Presence, Infinite Love

Monday, November 7, 2016

When he considered the primordial source of all things, [St Francis] was filled with even more abundant piety, calling all creatures, no matter how small, by

the name of brother and sister, because he knew they had the same source as himself. —Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274) [1]

If Christianity would have paid attention to the teachings and example of Jesus and Francis, our planet—“Mother Sister Earth,” as Francis called her—would perhaps be much healthier today. But it took until the 21st century for a pope to write an entire encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, making this quite clear and demanding.

We have not honored God’s Presence in the elemental, physical world. We made God as small as our own constricted hearts. We just picked and chose, saying, “Oh, God is really only in my group, in baptized people, in moral people, etc.” Is there that little of an Infinite God to go around? Do we have to be stingy with God? As Isaiah put it “the arm of God is not too short to save!” (59:1). Why pretend only we deserve God, and not other groups, religions, animals, plants, the elements, Brother Sun, and Sister Moon? It just won’t sell any more.

God is saving creation and bringing all creatures back where they began—into union with their Creator. God loves everything that God has made! All created things God proclaimed “good” (see Genesis 1:9-31 and Wisdom 11:24-12:1). But we, with our small minds, can’t deal with that. We have to whittle God and Love into small parts that our minds can handle and portion out. Human love is conditional and operates out of a scarcity model. There’s not enough to go around, just like Andrew said about the boy’s five loaves and two small fish (John 6:9). Humans can’t conceptualize or even think infinite or eternal concepts. We cannot imagine Infinite Love, Infinite Goodness, or Infinite Mercy.

Tertullian, a third century Father of the Church, often called the first Christian theologian, said “enfleshment is the hinge of salvation.” [2] We don’t come to the God Mystery through concepts or theories but by connecting with what is—with God’s immediate,

embodied presence which is all around us. I want you to begin to notice that almost all of Jesus' common stories and examples are nature based and relationship based—and never once academic theory! (Fr. Thomas Berry [1914-2009] taught the same way in our time, and I hope to share his work much more in my writings and teachings in the future.)

We have not recognized the one Body of Christ in creation. Perhaps we just didn't have the readiness or training. There is first of all the seeing, and then there is the recognizing; the second stage is called contemplation. We cannot afford to be blind any longer. We must learn to see and recognize how broad and deep the Presence is if we are to truly care for our common home.

References:

[1] Bonaventure, *The Life of Saint Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (HarperCollins: 2005), 84.

[2] Tertullian, "Caro salutis est cardo," from *De resurrectione carnis* (Treatise on the Resurrection), 8, 2.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, "The Christification of the Universe," a homily at Holy Family Parish, August 16, 2016, Center for Action and Contemplation, <https://cac.org/christification-of-the-universe/>

Nature as a Mirror of God

Tuesday, November 8, 2016

What some now call creation spirituality, deep salvation, or the holistic Gospel, was voiced long ago by some Eastern fathers, in the spirituality of the ancient Celts, by many of the Rhineland mystics, and surely by Francis of Assisi. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) communicated creation spirituality through music, art, poetry, medicine, gardening, and reflections on nature. She wrote in her famous book, *Scivias*:

You understand so little of what is around you because you do not use what is within you. [1]

This is key to understanding Hildegard and is very similar to Teresa of Ávila's understanding of the soul. Without using the word, she recognized that the human person is a microcosm with a natural affinity for or resonance with its macrocosm, which many call God. Our little world reflects the big world. The key word here is resonance. Contemplative prayer allows your mind to resonate with what is visible and right in front of you. Contemplation is the end of all loneliness because it erases the separateness between the seer and the seen.

Hildegard spoke often of *viriditas*, the greening of things from within, similar to what we now call photosynthesis. She already saw that there was a readiness in plants to receive the sun and to transform it into energy and life. She recognized that there is also an inherent connection between the physical world and the divine Presence. This connection translates into inner energy that is the soul and seed of everything, an inner voice calling you to "Become who you are; become all that you are." This is our "life wish" or "whole-making instinct."

Hildegard is a wonderful example of someone who lives safely inside an entire cosmology, a universe where the inner shows itself in the outer, and the outer reflects the inner, where the individual reflects the cosmos, and the cosmos reflects the individual. Hildegard says, "O Holy Spirit, you are the mighty way in which every thing that is in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, is penetrated with connectedness, penetrated with relatedness." [2] It is truly a Trinitarian universe, with all things whirling toward one another from orbits, to gravity, to ecosystems, to sexuality.

In another place, Hildegard has God saying:

I have created mirrors in which I consider all the wonders of my originality which will never cease. [3]

Indeed, for Hildegard nature was a mirror for the soul and a mirror for God. This mirroring affects a complete change in consciousness in how most of us see and experience reality. Later, Bonaventure (1217-1274) wrote: “In the soul’s journey to God we must present to ourselves the whole material world as the first mirror through which we may pass over to the Supreme [Artisan].” [4] The Dominican Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) said the same: “If humankind could have known God without the world, God would never have created the world.” [5]

Creation is not a mere scenic backdrop so humans can take over the stage. Creation is in fact a full participant in human transformation, since the outer world is absolutely needed to mirror the true inner world. There are not just two sacraments, or even seven; the whole world is a sacrament!

References:

[1] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* 1.2.29. Translation supplied by Avis Clendenen, “Hildegard: ‘Trumpet of God’ and ‘Living Light’” in *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 89 (2), Spring 1999, 25.

[2] Hildegard of Bingen, *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*, by Gabriele Uhlein (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1982), 41.

[3] Hildegard of Bingen’s *Book of Divine Works, with Letters and Songs*, ed. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1987), 128.

[4] Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey to God*, I, 9, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 63. Emphasis added.

[5] Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, ed. by Maurice O’Connell Walshe, revised by Bernard McGinn (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 275.

Adapted from Richard Rohr with John Feister, *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety* (Franciscan Media: 2001), 135; and unpublished “Rhine” talks (2015).

Creation as the Body of God

Wednesday, November 9, 2016

The universe itself can be understood as the primary revelation of the divine.
—Thomas Berry [1]

The incarnation of God did not only happen in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. That is just when some of us started taking it seriously. The incarnation actually happened approximately 13.8 billion years ago with a moment that we now call “The Big Bang” or the First Manifestation. At the birth of our universe, God materialized and revealed who God is. Ilia Delio writes: “Human life must be traced back to the time when life was deeply one, a Singularity, whereby the intensity of mass-energy exploded into consciousness.” [2] This Singularity provides a solid basis for inherent reverence, universal sacrality, and a spiritual ecology that transcends groups and religions.

St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) stated, “The immense diversity and pluriformity of this creation more perfectly represents God than any one creature alone or by itself.” [3] However, for some reason, perhaps human self-absorption, Christians thought humans were the only creatures that God cared about, and all else—animals, plants, light, water, soil, minerals—was literally just “food” for our own sustenance and enjoyment. I do not believe that the Infinitely Loving Source we call God would or could be so stingy and withholding.

God created millions of creatures for millions of years before Homo sapiens came along. Many of these beings are too tiny for us to see or have yet to be discovered; some have seemingly no benefit to human life; and many, like dinosaurs, lived and died long before we did. Why do they even exist? A number of the Psalms say that creation exists to reflect and give glory to God. The Jewish people already had a kind of “natural theology.” God has chosen to

communicate God's very Self in multitudinous and diverse shapes of beauty, love, truth, and goodness, each of which manifests another facet of the Divine. (See Job 38-39, Wisdom 13:1-9, Romans 1:20.)

Christians must realize what a muddle we have gotten ourselves into by not taking incarnation and the body of God seriously. As Sally McFague, a Christian theologian, says so powerfully, "Salvation is the direction of all of creation, and creation is the very place of salvation." [4] All is God's place, which is our place, which is the only and every place.

Our very suffering now, our crowded presence in this nest that we have largely fouled, will soon be the one thing that we finally share in common. It might be the one thing that will bring us together politically and religiously. The earth and its life systems, on which we all entirely depend, might soon become the very thing that will convert us to a simple lifestyle, to a necessary community, and to an inherent and natural sense of the Holy. We all breathe the same air and drink the same water. There are no Native, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, or Muslim versions of the universal elements. They are exactly the same for each of us.

References:

[1] Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 67.

[2] Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Orbis Books: 2013), 180.

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.47.1.

[4] Sally McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Fortress Press: 1993), 287.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, "Creation as the Body of God," in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, ed. Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (The Golden Sufi Center: 2013), 235-241.

Created to Love

Thursday, November 10, 2016

In the fourth century, St Augustine (354-430), an official Doctor of the Church (meaning his teaching is considered reliable), said, “the church consists in the state of communion of the whole world.” [1] Wherever we are connected, in right relationship—you might say “in love”—there is the Christ, there is the authentic “body of God” revealed. This body is more a living organism than any formal organization.

Non-human creation is invariably obedient to its destiny. Animals and plants seem to excitedly take their small place in the “circle of life,” in the balance of nature, in the dance of complete interdependence. It is only we humans who have resisted our place in “the one great act of giving birth” (see Romans 8:22), even though we had the most powerful role! Humans, in fact, have frequently chosen death for themselves and for so many other creatures besides. We are, by far, the most destructive of all species. As St Hildegard of Bingen (also a Doctor of the Church) writes:

Human beings alone are capable of disobeying God’s laws, because they try to be wiser than God... Other creatures fulfill the commandments of God; they honor [God’s] laws... But human beings rebel against those laws, defying them in word and action. And in doing so they inflict terrible cruelty on the rest of God’s creation. [2]

Jesus clearly taught that if we seek first God’s kingdom and the universal law of love (“love God and love one another,” Matthew 22:37-40), all the rest would take care of itself (see Matthew 6:33). We would no longer blatantly defy the laws of nature but seek to live in harmony and sustainability with Earth and all her creatures. This radical lifestyle demands a sense of inherent dignity that is

granted by God and not an off-and-on dignity determined by egocentric humans.

As Homo sapiens (“Wise Humans”), we should have taken our place as what Teilhard de Chardin called “the pinnacle of evolution” or “the rocks come to consciousness.” Then we could join with the rest of creation in obedience to our unique and full destiny. In poet Gerard Manley Hopkins’ words:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:

. . . myself it speaks and spells,

Crying What I do is me: for that I came. [3]

When we get the “who” right and realize that who I am is love, then we will do what we came to do: Love God and love all that this God has created. I firmly believe that grace is inherent to creation and not an occasional additive, and that God and goodness—not Armageddon—have both the first and final word, which we call divine creation and final resurrection.

The Soul of All Things

Friday, November 11, 2016

Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things.

Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.

Every creature is a word of God.

If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar—

I would never have to prepare a sermon.

So full of God is every creature. —Meister Eckhart [1]

Creation itself is the first and primary face of God. The world itself is the universal religion that precedes all organized religions. Do you really think that God would not have made God’s Self available to the Stone Age people and all historical peoples who were created in “the image and likeness of God,” just like all of us? We

monotheists should have been the first to recognize this because we believe in “one God who created all things!”

Or was God just waiting for the Catholics and Evangelicals to come along? Unfortunately, when we Catholics came, we loved to build fancy churches, without any encouragement from Jesus, I might add; and we went quickly inside them, disconnecting our minds and hearts from the natural world, probably because the natural world seemed wild and dangerous to us. Our very word profane comes from pro, meaning “in front of,” and fanum, meaning “temple.” We thought we lived “outside the temple.” Without a nature-based spirituality, it was a profane universe, bereft of Spirit, so we had to keep building shrines and churches to capture and hold our now domesticated and tamed God. Soon we did not know where to look for the divine. We became like fish in a huge ocean looking for water, and often arguing about who owned the water!

Again, note that I’m not saying God is all things (pantheism), but that each living thing reveals some aspect of God’s presence; God is both greater than the whole of our universe, and as Creator interpenetrates all created things (panentheism). No exceptions. The Judeo-Christian conviction about this was so total, that the ancient myths even had Lucifer created by God (Isaiah 14:12-15) and Satan in the divine council (Job 1:6-12).

St. Francis is the earliest recorded Christian to grant animals and objects subjectivity, mutuality, even naming them as sister and brother. He could talk and listen to them. Few Christians are trained to see all created things in this way, subject to subject. Yet it is the heart of all contemplative seeing. We were told animals didn’t have souls. I fully disagree.

Love is at the core of all beings. When you know this, as Thomas Berry says, the world becomes “a communion of subjects more than a collection of objects,” [2] to state it quite perfectly and profoundly.

When you love something, you grant it soul, you see its soul, and you let its soul touch yours. You have to love something deeply to know its soul. Before the resonance of love, you are largely blind to a thing's meaning, value, and its power to literally save you. In fact, until you can appreciate and even delight in the ecstatic wag of a dog's tail and other such ubiquitous signals, I doubt if you have discovered your own soul.

Gateway to Silence:

Brother Sun, Sister Moon, help me see God in all things.

References:

[1] *Earth Prayers: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations from Around the World*, eds. Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (HarperOne: 1991), 251.

[2] Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press), 86.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *A New Cosmology: Nature as the First Bible*, disc 2 (CAC: 2009)

Great Chain of Being

Sunday, November 13, 2016

I would like to reclaim an ancient, evolving, and very Franciscan metaphor—the Great Chain of Being—to name the nature of the universe, God, and the self, and to direct our future thinking.

Using this image, medieval theologians tried to communicate a linked and coherent world. The essential and unbreakable links in the chain include the Divine Creator, the angelic heavenly host, the human, the animal, the world of plants and vegetation, and planet Earth itself with its minerals and waters. In themselves and in their union together the links proclaim the glory of God (see Psalm 104) and the inherent dignity of all things. This image became the ontological basis for calling anything and everything sacred. Without it, the idea of “sacred” is subject to the feelings and whims of the individual.

Saint Bonaventure, who is called the second founder of the Franciscan Order, took Francis of Assisi's intuitive genius and spelled it out into an entire philosophy. He wrote: "The magnitude of things... clearly manifests... the wisdom and goodness of the triune God, who by power, presence and essence exists uncircumscribed in all things." [1] God is "within all things but not enclosed; outside all things, but not excluded; above all things, but not aloof; below all things, but not debased." [2] Bonaventure spoke of God as one "whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." [3] Therefore the origin, magnitude, multitude, beauty, fullness, activity, and order of all created things are the very "footprints" and "fingerprints" (vestigia) of God. Now that is quite a lovely and very safe universe to live in. Welcome home!

Bonaventure said further:

Therefore, open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love and worship, glorify and honor your God, lest the whole world rise against you.
[4]

It is hard to imagine how different the last seven hundred years might have been if this truly catholic (kata holos, or "according to the whole") vision had formed more Christians. Instead, our seeing has been partial and usually prejudicial. We have hardly seen at all. The individual decided where and if God's image would be recognized and honored.

The primary losers according to this labeling system were "sinners," variously defined: heretics defined by the empowered group; witches, usually defined by males; Muslims and Jews; indigenous peoples and religions; buffalo, whales, and elephants; land, water, and air itself. Finally, the Divine Presence ended up being almost nowhere except in gatherings of our own small

group—and even there we had levels of worthiness! No wonder we live in a secular and empty world where hardly anything seems sacred.

How can we call ourselves monotheists if we cannot see that “one God” unites our world? How can we call ourselves Christians if we don’t believe that being “Christ-like” means loving “the least of the brothers and sisters” (Matthew 25:40)?

Once the Great Chain was broken, and even one link withdrawn, the whole catholic/universal vision collapsed. It seems that we either honor God in all things or we soon lose the basis for seeing God in anything.

Gateway to Silence: Praised be You, my Lord, through all your creatures. — Francis of Assisi

References:

[1] Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey to God*, 1, 14, trans. Ewert Cousins (Paulist Press: 1978), 65.

[2] *Ibid.*, 5, 8, 100ff.

[3] *Ibid.*, 5, 8, 100.

[4] *Ibid.*, 1, 15, 67-68.

Adapted from Richard Rohr with John Feister, *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety* (Franciscan Media: 2001), 135-137.

The Univocity of Being

Monday, November 14, 2016

Christ has something in common with all creatures. With the stone he [sic] shares existence, with the plants he shares life, with the animals he shares sensation, and with the angels he shares intelligence. Thus all things are transformed in Christ since in the fullness of his nature he embraces some part of every creature. —Bonaventure [1]

In the stories of his life, St Francis is quoted as talking to or about larks, lambs, rabbits, pheasants, falcons, cicadas, waterfowl, bees, the famous wolf of Gubbio, pigs whom he praised for generously giving their bodies for our food, and hooked fish that he tried to throw back into the water whenever possible. He addresses inanimate creation too, as if it were indeed ensouled. His “Canticle of the Creatures” includes fire, wind, water, Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and, of course, “our Sister Mother Earth” herself. He even told the friars to only cut down part of a tree for their needs so that it could sprout again.

So-called “nature mysticism” was a worthy entranceway for Francis, and then Bonaventure laid the theological foundation for the same by seeing all things as likenesses of God, fingerprints and footprints (*vestigia Dei*) that reveal the divine DNA underlying all living links in creation. John Duns Scotus would philosophically name this “the univocity of all being.” In other words, we may speak of all beings with “one consistent voice.” Dawn Nothwehr, a Franciscan sister, lovingly calls it “cosmic mutuality.” [2]

The Franciscan notion of the “univocity of being” gave an early philosophical foundation to what we now call the circle of life or ecosystems, holons and fractals (parts that replicate the whole), unitive or contemplative thinking, and mysticism itself. Duns Scotus believed creation was more than an “analogy of being,” as Thomas Aquinas taught; there was an objective continuity between Creator and Creatures.

References:

[1] Bonaventure, “Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent,” *The Works of St Bonaventure* (St Anthony Guild: 1960).

[2] Dawn M. Nothwehr, *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader* (Franciscan Media: 2003).

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi* (Franciscan Media: 2014), 46-47, 161, 176-177; and

Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (Whitaker House: 2016), 78f.

Creation is the Primary Cathedral

Tuesday, November 15, 2016

Creation itself—not ritual or spaces constructed by human hands—was Francis’ primary cathedral. It is no accident that the majority of Jesus’ stories and metaphors are based on human and natural observations, not classroom theology. It is not unimportant that both Jesus and Francis were peripatetic teachers—talking while walking—and on the road of the world. In our own time, major teachers like Thomas Berry and Teilhard de Chardin have rediscovered this natural and universal theology.

The Gospel transforms us by putting us in touch with that which is much more constant and satisfying, literally the “ground of our being,” and has much more “reality” to it than theological concepts or the mere ritualization of reality. Daily cosmic events in the sky and on the earth are the Reality above our heads and beneath our feet every minute of our lives: a continuous sacrament. I find that a preoccupation with religious rituals tends to increase the more we remain untouched by Reality Itself—to which the best rituals can only point.

Jesus himself commonly points to things like the red sky, a hen, lilies, the fig tree, a donkey caught in a pit, the birds of the air, the grass in the field, the temple animals that he released from their cages, and on and on. He was clearly looking at the seemingly “nonreligious” world, ordinary things all around him, and appeared to do most of his teaching out of doors. Francis said, “Wherever we are, wherever we go, we bring our cell and our soul with us. Our Brother Body is our cell and our soul is the hermit living in the cell. If our soul does not live in peace and solitude within this moving cell, of what avail is it to live in a man-made cell?” [1]

Both Jesus and Francis knew that everything created was a message about the nature of God. Nature was not empty of divinity. Seeing nature as secular or merely functional created much of the loneliness and seeming meaninglessness in our contemporary worldview.

In the five-day Men's Rites of Passage [2]—that was a focus of my work for fifteen years—so many men felt that prayers and rituals inside of human-scale buildings were rather domesticated and controlled. They often perceived that the salvation offered inside these artificial constructs was also “small” and churchy. Almost without exception, the greatest breakthroughs for our men occurred during extended times of silence in nature, where the human and the merely verbal were not in control, or during rituals that were raw and earthy. Remember that good ritual, like art itself, merely imitates nature.

References:

[1] “Legend of Perugia,” *St Francis of Assisi: Omnibus of Sources*, 1055-1056.

[2] My work with men's spirituality is now carried by Illuman. Visit Illuman.org for information about male initiation rites and other resources.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi* (Franciscan Media: 2014), 47-48.

Nature Reflects God's Goodness

Wednesday, November 16, 2016

God brought things into being in order that his [sic] goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided. —Thomas Aquinas [1]

Nature itself is the primary Bible. As Paul says in Romans 1:20, “What can be known about God is perfectly plain, for God has made it plain. Ever since God created the world, God’s everlasting power and deity is there for the mind to see in all the things that God has created.” The world itself is the primary locus of the sacred, and actually provides all the metaphors that the soul needs for its growth.

If you scale chronological history down to the span of one year, with the Big Bang on January 1, then our species, Homo sapiens, doesn’t appear until 11:59 PM on December 31. That means our written Bible and the church appeared in the last nanosecond of December 31. I can’t believe that God had nothing to say until the last nanosecond. Rather, as both Paul and Thomas Aquinas say, God has been revealing God’s love, goodness, and beauty since the very beginning through the natural world of creation. “God looked at everything God had made, and found it very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Acknowledging the intrinsic value and beauty of creation, elements, plants, and animals is a major paradigm shift for most Western and cultural Christians. In fact, we have often dismissed it as animism or paganism. We limited God’s love and salvation to our own human species, and even then we did not have enough love to go around for all of humanity! God ended up looking quite miserly and inept, to be honest.

Listen instead to the Book of Wisdom:

How dull are all people who, from the things-that-are, have not been able to discover God-Who-Is, or by studying the good works have failed to recognize the Artist... Through the grandeur and beauty of the creatures we may, by analogy, contemplate their Author. [2]

All you have to do today is walk outside and gaze at one leaf, long and lovingly, until you know, really know, that this leaf is a participation in the eternal being of God. It’s enough to create

ecstasy. The seeming value or dignity of an object doesn't matter; it is the dignity of your relationship to the object that matters, that transforms object to subject, and allows you to meet things center to center or subject to subject, inner dignity to inner dignity. For a true contemplative, a gratuitously falling green leaf will awaken awe and wonder just as much as a golden tabernacle in a cathedral.

References:

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 47, 1.

[2] Wisdom 13:1, 5, New Jerusalem Bible; paraphrase, R. Rohr.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *A New Cosmology: Nature as the First Bible*, disc 1 (CAC: 2009), CD, MP3 download; and

Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (Whitaker House: 2016), 170.

One Part of Creation

Thursday, November 17, 2016

*If you would learn more, ask the cattle,
Seek information from the birds of the air.
The creeping things of earth will give you lessons,
And the fishes of the sea will tell you all.
There is not a single creature that does not know
That everything is of God's making.
God holds in power the soul of every living thing,
And the breath of every human body.
—Book of Job 12:7-10 [1]*

My friend and fellow Franciscan Jack Wintz has written a book called *Will I See My Dog In Heaven?* In it he takes the scriptural, Christian, and Franciscan traditions to their logical conclusions and his conclusion is Yes, of course!

As Franciscans, we studied the scriptures and chanted Psalms that were filled with allusions to the natural world and animals. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, it is clear that a loving God

includes all of creation in God's Kingdom. In the Genesis story, God's love, beauty, and goodness overflow into creation; and all creatures, including humans, are living peacefully in God's presence. Isaiah prophesies the "peaceable kingdom" to come (11:1-9; 65:17-25). In Revelation, John hears "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe" giving God "blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever" (Revelation 5:13). Finally, John sees "a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1) and the Bible ends with a new garden, complete with "the river of life-giving water" and "the tree of life" (22:1-2).

God shows authentic and primal concern for all animals by directing Noah to take a male and female of every species onto the ark (see Genesis 7:2-3) to be saved. After the flood, God makes a covenant, not just with people but with all of creation: "God said: 'This is the sign of the covenant that I am making between me and you and every living creature with you for all ages to come: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth'" (Genesis 9:12-13, emphasis mine). How did we miss that? God's plan is clearly social, historical, and universal, and not the anthropocentric and individualistic model that most of us grew up with.

Don't worry: I won't try to fit the whole Bible into this meditation. But I do encourage you, if you are so inclined, to study Scripture for yourself. Note especially these few selections: Daniel 3:57-82 and Psalms 104 and 148 calling on nature to bless and praise the Lord. As Wintz says, "We are a part of the Creation, not apart from it." [2] To love something is to be present to its inmost core and dignity. That might well be a definition of contemplation.

References:

[1] Book of Job 12:7-10, Jerusalem Bible; paraphrase, R. Rohr.

[2] Jack Wintz, *Will I See My Dog in Heaven?* (Paraclete Press: 2009), 29.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *A New Cosmology: Nature as the First Bible*, disc 2 (CAC: 2009), CD, MP3 download.

Our Only Home

Friday, November 18, 2016

Our world is a sacred whole in which we have a sacred mission. —Joanna Macy [1]

We are summoned to become fully human. We must mature into people who are, first and foremost, citizens of Earth and residents of the universe, and our identity and core values must be recast accordingly. —Bill Plotkin [2]

Joanna Macy, David Korten, and Bill Plotkin all speak of our era today as the time of the Great Turning. Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown write: “[If] there is to be a livable world for those who come after us, it will be because we have managed to make the transition from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-sustaining Society.” [3] In another place, they say this change “is germinating now, that sustainable society on which the future depends. Its seeds are sprouting in countless actions in defense of life, and in fresh perceptions of our mutual belonging in the living body of Earth—bold new perceptions deriving from both science and spirituality.” [4]

In his address to the United Nations General Assembly last year, Pope Francis said:

[It] must be stated that a true “right of the environment” does exist, for two reasons. First, because we human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect. Man, for all his remarkable gifts, which “are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology,” (Laudato Si’, 81) is at the same time a part of these spheres. He possesses a body shaped by physical, chemical and biological elements, and can only survive and develop if the ecological environment is favorable. Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is

harm done to humanity. Second, because every creature, particularly a living creature, has an intrinsic value, in its existence, its life, its beauty and its interdependence with other creatures. We Christians, together with the other monotheistic religions, believe that the universe is the fruit of a loving decision by the Creator, who permits man respectfully to use creation for the good of his fellow men and for the glory of the Creator; he is not authorized to abuse it, much less to destroy it. In all religions, the environment is a fundamental good. [5]

I am grateful we have a pope who recognizes the immense responsibility we humans have to care for the earth. Unfortunately, there are still many who deny the clear scientific evidence of our devastating impact. Climate change and its effects—unpredictable, changing patterns of drought, flooding, and powerful storms—are upon us. We have no time to lose. So many people and creatures will suffer and face extinction if we do not quickly change our lifestyle. Let us work together to creatively find solutions, to reduce our carbon footprint, to live more simply and sustainably on this, our only home. Humanity and the earth really will live or die together. The health of the planet and our continued existence depend upon our choices and actions.

References:

- [1] Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* (New Society Publishers: 1998), 21.
- [2] Bill Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World* (New World Library: 2008), 7.
- [3] Macy and Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, 17.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 6.
- [5] Pope Francis, Address to U. N. General Assembly, New York, September 25, 2015, <http://time.com/4049905/pope-francis-us-visit-united-nations-speech-transcript/>.

Universal Wisdom

Sunday, November 20, 2016

The Perennial Wisdom Tradition... offers ancient wisdom for contemporary living that is relevant to all of us, not just to a few. —David G. Benner [1]

The Perennial Tradition encompasses the constantly recurring themes in all of the world's religions and philosophies that continue to say:

There is a Divine Reality underneath and inherent in the world of things;

There is in the human soul a natural capacity, similarity, and longing for this Divine Reality;

The final goal of existence is union with this Divine Reality.

The “perennial philosophy” or “perennial tradition” is a term that has come in and out of popularity in Western and religious history, but has never been dismissed by the Universal Church. I was trained in Catholic systematic theology and Franciscan alternative orthodoxy; these and the whole Judeo-Christian tradition taught me to honor the visibility and revelation of God in all the world traditions and not just my own.

In many ways, the Perennial Tradition was affirmed at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) in forward-looking documents on ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) and non-Christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*). These affirm that there are some constant themes, truths, and recurrences in all of the world religions.

In *Nostra Aetate*, for example, the Council Fathers begin by saying that “All peoples comprise a single community and have a single origin [created by one and the same Creator God]... And one also is their final goal: God... The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions.” [2] Then the document goes on to praise Native religions, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam

as “reflecting a ray of that truth which enlightens all people.” [3] You have got to realize what courage and brilliance it took to write that in 1965, when very few people in any religion thought that way. In fact, most still don’t think that way today.

One early exception was St Augustine (354-430), a Doctor of the Church, who wrote: “The very thing which is now called the Christian religion was not wanting among the ancients from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh. After that time, the true religion, which had always existed, began to be called ‘Christian.’” [4] St Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa, and St Leo the Great all held similar understandings before Christianity turned to the later defensive (and offensive!) modes of heresy hunting, anti-Semitism, and various crusades. When any religion becomes proud, it also becomes dualistic and oppositional.

In some crucial ways, we have actually gone backward from the deep thinkers and writings of the Perennial Tradition. As Ken Wilber often repeats, good religion is made to order to serve as a “conveyor belt” forward through all the stages of human consciousness. How sad when we get stymied at one self-serving stage.

Gateway to Silence: All truth is one.

References:

[1] David G. Benner, “Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Living,” “The Perennial Tradition,” *Oneing*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (CAC: 2013), 24.

[2] *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II, 1965, #1, 2.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Augustine of Hippo, *Retractions*, 1:13.3, emphasis mine.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, “Introduction,” “The Perennial Tradition,” *Oneing*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (CAC: 2013), 11-12.

Whole-Making

Monday, November 21, 2016

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) stated that seminarians should “base themselves on a philosophy which is perennially valid,” and it encouraged the study of the entire history of philosophy and also “recent scientific progress.” [1] This sent willing Catholics in a new direction that is still unfolding.

In the authentic search for God, the field keeps expanding and never tightening. As does the universe itself, we move toward an ever-greater aliveness, a greater consciousness, a deeper union. The Jesuit scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), called this a divine allurements which is drawing the universe forward until a truly cosmic “Christ comes to full stature” (Ephesians 4:13). [2] For Teilhard, this was the Omega Point of all history, just as Duns Scotus had seen the Christ as the Alpha Point or the “first idea in the mind of God.” This made the entire universe and all of history unified, meaningful, and also hopeful! There is a trajectory and direction to it all, which is what both Jews and Christians were supposed to believe.

Few people put together science, philosophy, mysticism, and poetry as brilliantly as does Teilhard de Chardin. Ilia Delio, Franciscan sister and theologian, writes:

Teilhard spent his life trying to show that evolution is not only the universe coming to be, but it is God who is coming to be. Divine Love, poured into space-time, rises in consciousness and erupts in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, becoming the pledge of our future in the risen Christ: “I am with you always until the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20). We can read the history of our 13.7 billion year old universe as the rising up of Divine Love incarnate, which bursts forth in the person of Jesus, who reveals Love’s urge toward wholeness through reconciliation, mercy, peace, and forgiveness. Jesus is the love of God incarnate, the wholemaker who shows the way of evolution toward unity in love. In Jesus, God breaks through and points us in a new

direction; not one of chance or blindness but one of ever-deepening wholeness in love. In Jesus, God comes to us from the future to be our future. Those who follow Jesus are to become wholemakers, uniting what is scattered, creating a deeper unity in love. [3]

Carl Jung viewed the archetype of God as the instinct toward wholeness, and I think he is exactly right. I've always said that Jesus didn't come to create a new or exclusive religion. He came to reform and reinvigorate the very meaning of all religion—and ground it in human nature and creation itself—which is universal. Indeed, we are called “to become wholemakers, uniting what is scattered, creating a deeper unity in love.”

References:

[1] *Optatam Totius*, October 28, 1965, #15.

[2] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 107. It is hard to ever be small again after you have read Teilhard de Chardin.

[3] Ilia Delio, “Love at the Heart of the Universe,” “The Perennial Tradition,” *Oneing*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (CAC: 2013), 21-22. (This issue of *Oneing*, a limited edition publication, is no longer available in print; however, the eBook is available from Amazon and iTunes. Explore additional issues of *Oneing* at store.cac.org.)

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass: 2013), 134-135.

Truth Is One

Tuesday, November 22, 2016

Science is no longer, nor should it ever have been, our enemy; instead quantum physics, biology, and other academic disciplines are revealing that science is our new and excellent partner, much better than philosophy ever was. Truth is One. If something is spiritually true, it will also be true in the physical world, and all disciplines and all religions will somehow be looking at this “one truth” from different angles, goals, assumptions, and vocabulary. If

we are really convinced that we have the Big Truth, then we should also be able to trust that others will see it from their different angles—or it is not the Big Truth.

No one wants to be our enemy unless they assume that we ourselves have chosen to live in our own small tent and cannot or do not want to talk to them on their terms. Christians have too often assumed ill will and been far too eager to create enemies instead of realizing that others often enjoyed very similar “good news” inside of different packaging.

As my colleague and fellow Living School teacher Cynthia Bourgeault says, “We begin to discover that our Buddhist and Jewish and Islamic and Hindu friends are not competitors. Religion is not a survival of the fittest. There is a deep understanding that we all swim together or we sink together. Each religious tradition reveals a color of the heart of God that is precious.” [1]

Big Truth is written in reality itself before it was ever written in books. If you say yes to Reality, to “what is,” you will recognize the same truth when it shows itself in anyone’s sacred scriptures. If you do not respond to the “good, the true, and the beautiful” (the three qualities of being) in daily reality, I doubt if you will ever see it in the best Bible translation in the world. If it is the truth, it is true all the time and everywhere, and sincere lovers of truth will take it from wherever it comes. If it is true, it is common domain, and “there for the mind to see in the things that God has made” (Romans 1:20). Or, as Aquinas was fond of saying, quoting Ambrose (another Doctor of the Church), “If it’s true, it is always from the one Holy Spirit.” [2] The important question is not, “Who said it?” but, “Is it true?”

Gateway to Silence: All truth is one.

References:

[1] Cynthia Bourgeault, *Returning to Essentials: Teaching an Alternative Orthodoxy*, disc 1 (CAC: 2015), CD, MP3 download.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 8. Also *Summa Theologia I-II*, q. 109, a. 1, ad 1. The statement “*Omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, a Spiritu Sancto est*” is recorded in *Patres Latini*, 17, 245; today, the unknown author is called Ambrosiaster.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass: 2013), 135-136.

What we are looking for is doing the looking

Wednesday, November 23, 2016

*I am a hole in a flute that the Christ's breath moves through,
listen to this music. —Hafiz (c. 1320-1389) [1]*

Aldous Huxley's definition of “the perennial philosophy” is an adequate definition of my own understanding of the same:

The metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality, and the ethic that places man's [sic] final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being. This is immemorial and universal. [2]

Thus, the Perennial Tradition says that there is a capacity, a similarity, and a desire for divine reality inside all humans. What we seek is what we are, which is exactly why Jesus says that we will find it (see Matthew 7:7-8). The Perennial Tradition invariably concludes that you initially cannot see what you are looking for because what you are looking for is doing the looking. The seeker becomes the seen. God is never an object to be found or possessed as we find other objects, but the One who shares our own deepest subjectivity—or our “self.” Merely physical things can be known subject to object; spiritual knowing is to know things subject to subject, center to center (see 1 Corinthians 2:10-13). This is how the

soul knows. Not surprisingly, the soul recognizes soul in whatever it sees: soil, waters, trees, animals, and fellow humans. Only such a depth of seeing can enter into a fruitful and mutual exchange with God. To objectify God in any way is not to know God.

I believe the Christ is the archetypal True Self offered to history, where matter and spirit finally operate as one, where divine and human are held in one container, where the psychic and the physical are two sides of the same coin, and “where there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female” (Galatians 3:28). The Christ Self fully allows and enjoys the human-divine exchange. The small self thinks about whether it could be true and usually ends up saying no.

David Benner writes in CAC’s journal Oneing:

The moral of the Perennial Wisdom Tradition is, “Don’t settle for less than the truth of your Christ-self.” The ego-self, with which we are all familiar, is a small cramped place when compared with the spaciousness of our true self-in-Christ. This is the self that is not only at one within itself; it is at one with the world, and with all others who share it as their world. It is, therefore, one with Ultimate Reality. [3]

References:

[1] Shams-ud-din Muhammad Hafiz, “The Christ’s Breath,” *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, rendered by Daniel Ladinsky (Penguin Compass: 2002), 153.

[2] Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), vi.

[3] David G. Benner, “Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Living,” “The Perennial Tradition,” *Oneing*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (CAC: 2013), 28. (This issue of *Oneing*, a limited edition publication, is no longer available in print; however, the eBook is available from Amazon and iTunes. Explore additional issues of *Oneing* at store.cac.org.)

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass: 2013), xii-xiii.

Unity, Not Uniformity

Thursday, November 24, 2016

If we take the world's enduring religions at their best, we discover the distilled wisdom of the human race. —Huston Smith [1]

For those of us living in the 21st century—an age of globalization, mass migrations, and increasingly multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies—mutual understanding and respect, based on religious pluralism rather than religious exclusivism, are extremely critical to our survival. The insights from the perennial tradition have much to contribute in developing and strengthening multi-faith relations. Its insights help to combat religious discrimination and conflicts between and within religious traditions, and to develop more pluralistic paths of religious spirituality. Today... we see scholars and spiritual teachers forging new, more inclusive spiritual paths that recognize other religious traditions as sources of insight and wisdom. They are informed by the teachings and spiritual practices (meditation and contemplation) of multiple religious traditions. —John L. Esposito [2]

The divisions, dichotomies, and dualisms of the world can only be overcome by a unitive consciousness at every level: personal, relational, social, political, cultural, inter-religious dialogue, and spirituality in particular. This is the unique and central job of healthy religion (remember that re-ligio means to re-ligament!).

Many teachers have made the central but oft-missed point that unity is not the same as uniformity. Unity, in fact, is the reconciliation of differences, and those differences must be maintained—and yet overcome! You must actually distinguish things and separate them before you can spiritually unite them, but usually at cost to yourself (see Ephesians 2:14-16). And this is probably the rub! If only Christianity and other religions had made that simple clarification, so many problems—and overemphasized,

separate identities—could have moved to a much higher level of love and service.

Paul made this universal principle very clear in several of his letters. For example, “There is a variety of gifts, but it is always the same Spirit. There are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord, working in all sorts of different ways in different people. It is the same God working in all of them” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). The community at Ephesus was taught in Paul’s tradition: “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is Father of all, over all, through all, and within all, and each one of us has been given our own share of grace” (Ephesians 4:5-7).

Even our central template of Trinity maintains the clear distinction of “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” while at the same time insisting they are One. Divine Unity absolutely maintains and yet radically overcomes seeming distinctions. How different history could have been if we had only believed that at ever broader levels. I will develop this important theme more tomorrow.

References:

[1] Huston Smith, *The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith*, PBS television series in 5 parts (1996; New York: WNET), DVD. This phrase introduced each episode.

[2] John L. Esposito, PhD, “The Perennial Tradition in an Age of Globalization,” “The Perennial Tradition,” *Oneing*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (CAC: 2013), 34.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, “Introduction,” “The Perennial Tradition,” *Oneing*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (CAC: 2013), 12-13.

Oneing

Friday, November 25, 2016

We must finally go back to the ultimate Christian source for our principle—the central doctrine of the Trinity itself. Yes, God is “One,” just as our Jewish ancestors taught us (Deuteronomy 6:4),

and yet the further, more subtle level of meaning is that this oneness is actually the radical love union between three completely distinct “persons” of the Trinity. The basic principle and problem of “the one and the many” has been overcome in God’s very nature. God is a mystery of relationship, and in its deepest form this relationship is called love. The three are not uniform at all—but quite distinct—and yet completely oned in mutual self-emptying and infinite outpouring. God, and all of creation, is a mystery of relationship!

We humans are not autonomous beings either; though we are seemingly separate, we are radically one, too, just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one. We really are created in God’s “image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26f), much more than we ever imagined. Trinity is our universal template for the nature of reality and for how to reconcile unity and diversity at every level.

We are not seeking some naïve “everything is one”; rather, we seek much more: the deeper “unity of the Spirit which was given us all to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13). We must study, pray, wait, reconcile, and work to achieve true unity—not an impossible uniformity, which was the tragic mistake of both the early notion of Christendom and a later notion of Communism.

Julian of Norwich says, “The love of God creates in us such a oneing that when it is truly seen, no person can separate themselves from another person,” [1] and “In the sight of God all humans are oned, and one person is all people and all people are in one person.” [2]

This is not some 21st century flabby fabrication. This is not pantheism or mere New Age optimism. This is the whole point; it was, indeed, supposed to usher in a “new age” (Matthew 19:28)—and it still can, and will. This is the Perennial Tradition. Our job is not to discover it, but only to retrieve what has been discovered—

and lost—and rediscovered again and again, in the mystics and seers, and prophets of all religions.

Gateway to Silence: All *truth* is one.

References:

[1] Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 65.

[2] *Ibid.*, 51.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, “Introduction,” “The Perennial Tradition,” *Oneing*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (CAC: 2013), 13-14.