

Communion with All

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The Age of Nations is past. The task before us now, if we would not perish, is to shake off our ancient prejudices, and to build the earth.

– Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 1936

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is reported to have said, “Do to others as you would want them do to you.” These simple and familiar words convey a truth about how we are to act in the world. The words also convey a message about our fundamental connectedness as humans. A more contemporary way of stating a similar message would be to say, “We are one. We are all a part of an amazing journey in which our fates are linked together. We breathe the same air and drink the same water. We are all in this together.”

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What is needed in the world today is a new way of thinking that embodies this basic truth. Until recently, the human species had not experienced Earth as one integrated system. We had limited experience of other peoples and other cultures. Our primary loyalty has most often been limited to our family, tribe, race, religion, ideology or nation. Our identification has been restricted, and we have often seen those beyond that identification as enemies.

There is a growing awareness in the world today that we can no longer see ourselves as totally separate from one another. The visual symbol of this new awareness is the picture of Earth from space. Along with this awareness is a greater appreciation for the diversity of creation and the importance of maintaining and honoring and learning from all aspects of creation. This also means learning to profoundly respect and learn from our differences. In our time we are able to see, like never before, that all of life is interdependent, that we share a common destiny, that our individual well being depends on the well being of the whole system.

The basic message in the proceeding paragraphs represents a “word” that has been profoundly important to me at a very personal level. It is a view that I have attempted to incorporate into my life on a daily basis and one that I

have sought to be reflected in my life and work as a whole. It is also a message that I have attempted to communicate with others in a wide variety of ways. It is a message that I believe to be desperately needed in our world today. Many have suggested the survival of the planet may hinge upon our collective ability to incorporate this new way of thinking into our lives and our social systems.

By starting with the quote from the Gospel of Luke, I am, in one sense, attempting to manipulate the tradition to get it to say what I want it to say. The message about our connectedness is only one of many themes that might be found in the tradition. I am also tapping into whatever existing loyalty and commitment to the tradition may be present on the part of the reader. I am primarily interested in the tradition to the extent that it is helpful in conveying this core message. I personally have limited interest in other major themes or directions that may be present in the tradition.

I also approach the tradition somewhat skeptically as one who has seen the tradition misused, in my view, in a manner that has had tragic consequences and in a manner that contributes to the problem of not understanding ourselves as one. The Christian tradition, like other religious traditions, has been used to divide the people of Earth. I see people using words and expressions that have, for all purposes, lost their meaning and relevance to people in the 21st century. I see people afraid of facing a future in which we must essentially recreate the tradition if it is to be used for something other than a regressive force within society.

My interest in this “word” grows out of my own personal experience and my view of the world we live in. I approach the current task as a white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, American male who has been raised and indoctrinated in the Western, Protestant Christian tradition. I was raised in the south and was sensitized to the issue of racism. I also approach the present task as one who has spent over five years among the poorest of the poor on the planet having lived in Egypt, India and Indonesia. This experience has caused me to be sensitive to the fact that roughly 15% of those on the planet control over 85% of the earth’s resources and that 85% of those on the planet attempt to get by on less than 15% of Earth’s resources.

I am professionally involved in assisting people in resolving conflicts through the use of mediation. I am deeply concerned about the use of

violence throughout the planet—from domestic violence to war between nations. I also find myself deeply concerned about matters related to ecological destruction, homophobia, consumerism and patriarchy. Finally, I approach this task as one very much in need of love and forgiveness from others. I am in need of hope for the future as I attempt to respond to the needs described above. I have experienced being part of a caring community and I continue to search for ways of connecting with others in an honest and profound way.

In the first part of the last century, German theologian Rudolph Bultmann described the task of contemporary theology as demythologizing the traditional Christian language. At the risk of oversimplifying, he challenged modern theology to reinterpret the Christian symbols in such a way that they might be understood by people in our time. In many respects, the Christian terms developed in a time in which an entirely different worldview was predominant. This paper, in a sense, seeks to continue the work that has been taking place as Bultmann describes. The job is one not simply of extracting the Christian language from its original mythic structure in an effort to consider it in the abstract. The job includes putting it into a context that is appropriate for our time.

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I will seek to interpret the Christian language in the context of our fundamental unity.

In our time the task of demythologizing the Christian understanding involves a dialogue between science and religion. In the 13th century, the works of Aristotle were made available in a manner that restored confidence in empirical knowledge and gave rise to a school of philosophers known the Averroists. The Averroists suggested that philosophy was independent of revelation. The rise in popularity of the movement essentially threatened the ability of the church to be taken seriously and engage in the dialogue of the day. If the church had chosen to ignore the work of Aristotle, chances are that the church would have become irrelevant because of the clarity and persuasiveness of Aristotle's work.

It was in this context that Thomas Aquinas managed to reconcile the position of the church with the works of Aristotle. Aquinas argued that the

truths of faith and those of sense experience are fully compatible and complementary. Aquinas organized the knowledge of his time in the context of faith. Through the work of Aquinas, the church put its imprimatur on the cultural material of the time. This paper will draw heavily from three authors (Sullie McFague, Kaufman and Thomas Berry) that have attempted to do much the same work in dealing with the scientific breakthroughs that have taken place in our time.

The dialogue between science and religion must occur at several levels and should take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect in which each sphere must come to recognize the scope and limitations of its own area of knowledge. Science has shaped the collective imagination in our time like nothing else. Science, and its brother, technology, has transformed the face of the planet and changed our lives and our thinking forever. On the one hand, science has pushed our ethics into a whole new realm. On the other hand, science seems to hold the seeds needed to recapture a profound sense of the sacred in our time as it serves to illuminate the wonder of creation.

While science offers clues to a new theology, it will not do the job alone. Theology may, in a sense, partner with science in identifying and articulating the principles and patterns that appear to be built into creation. Science seems to lack the ability to frame these patterns and principles in such a way that speaks to the fundamental questions of human existence. Science allows theology to see creation and nature in a new way. Science doesn't give us a new theology. Science does give us a new way to look at creation that produces a new theology.

Theology should respond to science as a credible and contemporary view of reality. Theology doesn't adopt the scientific view. Theology incorporates the scientific view and allows it to illuminate the wonder and mystery of creation.

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basic story about the nature of the universe. The cosmology of a people concerns not only stories of origin but also the general way of thinking about our relationship to the world around us. The cosmology of a culture shapes the social structures within the society. Our collective story serves to shape

our emotions and provides us with life purpose and energizes our actions. Our story helps us to make sense of our suffering. It gives a sense of identity and provides a context in which life can be meaningful.

Since the Enlightenment, much of Western Christianity has focused upon matters of the spirit as distinct from matters of a physical nature. To some extent this dichotomy grew out of seeing the human as “just below the angels.”

The uneasy truce between science and religion centered upon science being concerned with the natural world and religion focusing upon spiritual matters. This split had at least two tragic consequences: first, religion was now reluctant to draw upon the natural world as a means of experiencing the divine; second, science was now able to relate to Earth as mere stuff lacking any sense of the divine. Western society generally sees nature as inert, lifeless stuff to be manipulated and messed with as long as it serves our purposes. The divine is too often seen as something out there or up there but not found in the real, physical world. Religion often challenged people to transcend the natural world in order to connect with the divine.

Being able to detach from the physical world in that manner allowed scientists in the West to probe, explore, and analyze the stuff of Earth in a new and unprecedented manner. This led us to the incredible explosion of science and technology of the present age. This view of Earth has now turned against us in an incredibly destructive manner. In more recent years, science has begun to recognize a fundamentally different basis for reality. Rather than seeing the universe in all of its separateness and individual parts, science has begun to see reality as fundamentally connected.

Recent discoveries offer a way of overcoming this split that has been present for several centuries. Physics demonstrates that nothing exists in isolation. All of matter, from subatomic particles to the galaxies in space, is part of an intricate web of relationships in a unified whole. Biology reveals that, in a totally interrelated system, the principle of survival of the fittest has

new meaning. The “fittest” is now seen as that species that best contributes to the well being of the whole system. Ecology provides the understanding that all parts of a living system are interconnected and that greater stability results from increased diversity. These and other “discoveries” reveal a new paradigm and point us in the direction of a new relationship with Earth and with one another.

A growing number of scientists now suggest that the universe is more like an evolving, maturing organism that has been developing for 15 billion years. The universe has become increasingly complex and diversified, beginning with hydrogen, then forming galaxies, stars and planets and evolving more complex life forms over time.

Sallie McFague says that the “common creation story” is at the heart of the contemporary scientific view of reality. She highlights five important features of the common creation story:



- (1) The evolutionary perspective serves to put humanity in its proper context as far as having just recently appeared in the past several hundred thousand years or so. McFague explains: “On the universe’s clock, human existence appears a few seconds before midnight. This suggests that the whole show could scarcely have been for our benefit.”
- (2) The story is an ongoing story with an open future. The story doesn’t claim to have it all figured out. We are always becoming and it is at least partly up to us to determine what the future will be.
- (3) There is a radical interrelatedness and interdependence of all aspects of creation. Everything that is came out of this evolutionary process. We are all cousins. Everything that is shares a common source and history.

- (4) Creation is multileveled in terms of complexity. Included in the increasing complexity is increasing subjectivity or the ability to experience and feel. The more complex the entity, the more vulnerable and dependent it is upon the other levels that support it.
- (5) The common creation story is public and can be known by all. It includes everyone and is available to everyone. The story represents a common meeting place for diverse meeting place for diverse people.

The universe, through the human, is now capable of reflecting upon its own significance and meaning. According to Thomas Berry, “The human being is that being in whom the universe reflects upon itself and its numinous origin in its own unique mode of conscious awareness.” The human is less a being on Earth or in the universe than a dimension of Earth and the universe. The Bible says that humans are created in the image of God. Science suggests that whatever creative force gave rise to the universe also gave rise to the human. In either case, we are bonded with the creative powers in the universe. We are natural creatures. Nature is at work within our bodies all of the time. Our genetic coding brings about healing when our bodies are injured. The same principles that guide nature also guide our bodies at the physical level and at the level of our creative imagination.

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There are spontaneities within us that are the same creative energies that cause the sun to rise, the rose to bloom and the cow to give birth to the calf. These creative energies can serve as a source of guidance to us. These instincts come from the same mysterious source as the entire universe. In the words of Kaufman: “This spontaneity as the guiding force of the universe, can be thought of as the mysterious impulse that gave birth to the primordial fireball.” Thomas Berry makes a similar point in saying “The human is that being in whom the grand diversity of the universe celebrates itself in conscious awareness.”

Thomas Berry makes a distinction between our genetic coding (hard-wiring) and cultural coding. The extent of the cultural coding as a species is part of what distinguishes us from other species. Use of language is part of

our genetic coding. Which language we speak would depend upon the language of our parents, where we were born and other such specific factors. Part of our genetic coding seems to be a response of awe when we encounter mystery. Organized religion is part of our cultural coding; that is part of what we have created as cultural and social beings. Worshipping some form of the divine seems to be as essential part of being human. Historical evidence would seem to indicate that some religious response to life is built into the human constitution.

Humans, like the rest of creation, are incredibly diverse. In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas comments on the multitude of things that come from God:

because God’s goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, God produced many and diverse creatures, so that what was wanting in one, in the representation of the divine goodness, might be supplied by another. For goodness in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature.

Thomas Berry argues that this need to appreciate diversity can be applied to all areas of human activity including religion. Given the great diversity within nature one could expect that any single revelation of the divine would, in some respect, be incomplete. The divine isn’t revealed all at once. In his study of world religions, Berry has observed that each religious tradition is full and complete, in some respect, by itself although “each is a vital expanding process with an ever renewing series of transformations throughout the centuries.” Each of the major religions have evolved and remained open to change and interpretation as they have interacted with new breakthroughs within the culture or in interaction with other traditions.

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Berry argues that each of these revelatory experiences is needed in order to more fully grasp the Whole. It is also the case that each tradition carries the whole within itself in much the same way that the entire DNA structure of a human being is carried within each and every molecule. Berry urges

caution among Christians speaking about the fullness of the Christian revelatory experience. He suggests that the church has participated in various forms of bigotry and arrogance in asserting that the Christian tradition represents an exclusive claim to the truth.

Another important aspect of our humanity as an extension of the whole of creation relates to our new power stemming from technology. With the splitting of the atom and various other technological breakthroughs that occurred in the 20th century, Einstein has suggested that “everything has changed except our way of thinking.” Today, we exercise power over forces that are on an order of magnitude many times greater than was available in previous periods in history.

According to Berry, “The earth that directed itself instinctively in its former phase now seems to be entering a phase of conscious decision through its human expression.” Earth seems to have entrusted its destiny to human decision in a brand new manner. God seems to have now given the human community the power to destroy its basic life systems that have enabled the evolutionary process to unfold up to this moment.

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Science suggests that humans are now involved in giving shape to the evolutionary process. We have the capacity to destroy creation or give positive shape to it. In either case we are responsible for shaping the future. We have decisions to make in much the same way as the people of Israel (Deut. 30:19) were challenged to choose the life-affirming path.

Understanding ourselves as co-creators in the evolutionary process invites us to consider the whole of creation. We are challenged to think more comprehensively than ever before. In understanding our unique role, we are compelled to act out of a concern that takes us beyond a concern for oneself, one’s group, tribe or country. This is similar to a call to love others as our neighbor.

Christianity has maintained that God acts in and through history. Given what we know today about the 15 billion-year evolutionary process, we might come to understand God as the guiding, creative force that underlies

the process. God is revealed to us as we recognize and celebrate the goodness of creation present throughout the universe. God is also seen in the patterns and principles that emerge in and through creation.

If we understand ourselves to be part of a process that has emerged as a result of trial and error, we may be more inclined toward a greater willingness to forgive others and ourselves. We may actively seek out ways to exercise compassion and cooperation in regard to other humans and the rest of creation.

We may even be compelled to take risks and sacrifice on behalf of future generations. As participants in the creative, evolutionary journey, we come to understand our actions as sacred, while fully aware of our limited knowledge and understanding of the entire process. Rather than acting out of hubris or arrogance, we act out of humility and in a tentative manner as we feel our way in the dark.

