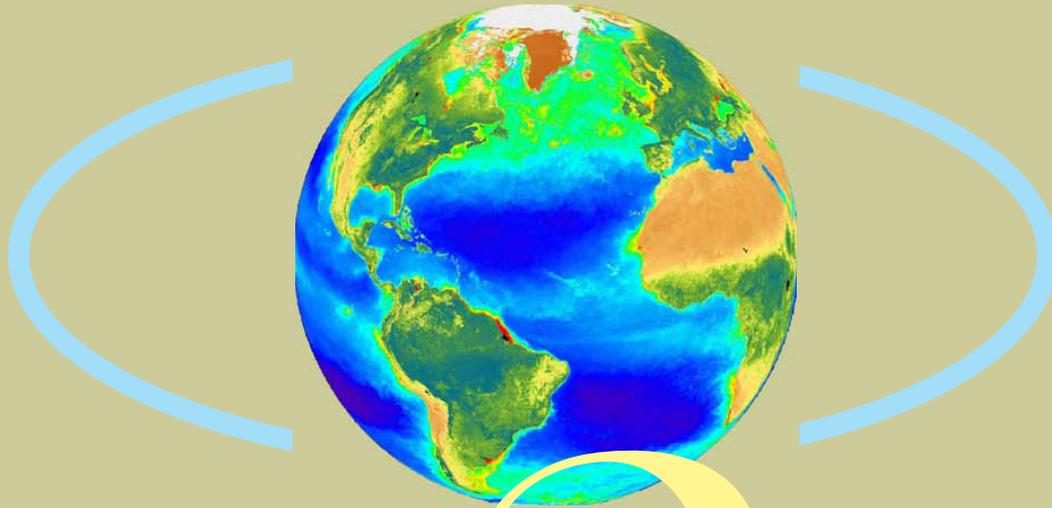


Exploring the Great Mystery

connecting--incarnation--justice-with-compassion--creation



how do I understand creation? what is the divine purpose in creating the world? how do I understand God and God's activity in creation? how does Jesus fit into my understanding? do humans have a distinctive place in the community of all life? what is Cornelia's legacy? what is it that draws us today to a renewed understanding of the mystery of God? what are the religious values at stake in urging people to take responsibility for preserving and protecting the earth?

These questions run through the five essays included in this e-book. They were written in 2012 for the Holy Child community by members of the American Province planning committee in preparation for a presentation by Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker on "The Call of Incarnation in Our World: Ecology, Justice and Peace". The task of the committee was to probe the meaning and relevance of our Cornelian legacy for today in relation to the new cosmology, to make it available to others for the future:

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Introduction: Fishing for God in the deep waters of Mystery

Barbara Linen, shcj

“Another lesson which the Church must constantly recall is that she cannot leave simplicity behind; otherwise she forgets how to speak the language of Mystery. Not only does she herself remain outside the door of the mystery, but she proves incapable of approaching those who look to the Church for something which they themselves cannot provide, namely, God himself. At times we lose people because they don’t understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity and import an intellectualism foreign to our people. Without the grammar of simplicity, the Church loses the very conditions which make it possible “to fish” for God in the deep waters of his Mystery.”

Pope Francis in Rio, 27 July, 2013



How do we (SHCJ, Associates and co-workers) express our ‘fishing for God in the deep waters of mystery’? Dear readers, as you move through the offerings presented by a few of us, it is hoped you will find resonances with your own searches for ways to articulate for ourselves and for others the mission of the SHCJ today.

We have different approaches, differing visions, opinions on what is important. Can our imaginations expand enough to simply accept the bits of truth in each other’s words, and perhaps more to the point, in each other’s lives? We have in such operations a shining, ‘indefatigable’

example in our 76-year old Pope. He landed back in Rome July 29 after a grueling schedule of events in Rio de Janeiro for WYD. According to his ‘tweet’ for the day: “I am back home, and I assure you that my joy is much greater than my exhaustion!” May we know that joy in our living of the mystery.

A little history of the Goal 1 group (from the 2011 American Province Plan): we were called together as a task force charged with providing “education and programming to deepen the understandings of Cornelia’s gift to us, including (an understanding of) the interconnections among Incarnation, Creation, and Justice with Compassion.”

We began our work conscious of some differences in the approaches of the individuals who constituted the group. Efforts were made to dialogue about the differences. Those efforts continue, newly encouraged by Pope Francis’ constant references to the need to stay in dialogue even when we differ (see for example, <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-address-to-celam-leadership>) — as we share Cornelia’s gift, as we continue to go deeper into the mystery of God with us, as we acknowledge our humble limits.



Charism/Mystery/Gift/Treasure

Catherine Quinn, shcj

We humans praise, love and serve our good God and our neighbors with our heads and hands and hearts. With kudos to Ignatius, I acknowledge that is a facile statement, but nonetheless true. With my head I ponder the mysteries of Incarnation and creation. With my hands I care for the earth and beings of creation. One of my special joys is tending to the rose bushes on my balcony—protecting them from cold winds and hot sun. Occasionally I catch glimpses of humming birds—all the way up at the eighth floor! My heart stretches out to God, to friends, family, SHCJ, to my elevator companions and to strangers.

Who/what makes this kind of life possible? Simply: Our great and good and generous God. Others who are brighter, stronger and more loving than I offer their explanations. But for me today I want to focus on gift and especially the gift of being a woman called in the same kind of way as Cornelia. In other words, I want to share my insights on charism.

My insights about charism come from my lived experience. It probably is not yours but I daresay you will recognize similarities. In any case, I do want to share where I am coming from. Yes, I studied theology and that discipline certainly has impacted my thoughts and feelings and actions. But now these remarks are plain, my experience is after the manner, ordinary.

I entered the Society because I wanted to be very close to God. The only ones who spoke in a simple intimate way about God were SHCJ and some of my friends, especially from St. Leonard's. My family was strong in faith and hope and love. We prayed together and talked "about" God. We tried to live by the gospel. My father, for whatever reason, could quote the Old and New Testaments with great fluidity. But we were very reserved when it came to articulating religious experience. I wanted more of what today we call faith-sharing. I wanted others to tell me about God's ways with them. The logical step was to enter the Society. The choice was not without struggle and conflict but resistance was out of the question.

What was it that could not be resisted? Mystery, charism, gift, treasure. Upon entering I did not think about doing, I thought about being with God. It was not long before actions not words became a reality. Manual labor, practice teaching taught me about loving God with my hands and head as well as my heart. And so I grew.

Life in the Society has stretched me. In that stretching, I have come to believe that charism comes before mission. Charism precedes mission; prompts mission. The gospels explicate the way Jesus chose disciples. Jesus got their attention. A very fine example of Jesus' tactics is in John's gospel both at the beginning in the invitation to Andrew and at the end with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus attracted their hearts. He spent time with them and revealed himself to them as irresistible. Then, he set them to work as fishers of other persons. Paragraph four of our Constitutions shows the same dynamic. Often we quote only the last sentence as our mission statement. But, we need the whole paragraph to manifest the mystery.

Charism is that treasure dropped into hearts by the Spirit of Jesus. It prompts service.

Our Constitutions speak of those called in the same kind of way as Cornelia. I sense this is the way she was drawn: She experienced the powerful attraction of our good, good God. She chose being with God along with others. Her grace, gift was so intense and fiery that it shone through her to others. She shared it with Pierce and the children. It cost her hearth and home, Pierce and the children. The charism story is imprinted on our very beings because we have been called in the same kind of way.

At various times we have spoken of the families of Cornelia Connelly. As time passes it seems to be clearer and clearer that this is not just an easy description of those sharing her spirit or, better, the Holy Child Spirit. Vowed members of the Society are not the only ones called in the same kind of way as Cornelia. We value our associates and are slowly learning that their insights into Cornelia's graces enhance our own. We seek to include friends and benefactors, alums, and those who labor with us in our planning for the future. Together we are probing the beginning grace so that we may be more fruitful. We hold a treasure not made by hands: our charism.

Charism for me resembles a precious gem with many facets. This gem belongs to all of us. As we ponder its meaning we pause over different facets at different moments. Thus we are moved to slightly different but always related insights. These insights prompt us to mission and or ministry. The brilliance of some insights may overpower others for a time. But only for a time. In the fullness of time, all facets will be exposed. We are at a special moment in our family history. The beauty of the whole makes the reality of the charism. We, the many, need to tell each other who we are. We show one another the charism for mission.

Cornelia wrote to her niece Bella Bowen at one time: Come, come, my dear, be a woman with a head and a heart. As we go about planning for the future of the American Province (as well as for the whole Society) let us be women with heads and hearts. We are here for the sake of charism and therefore, for mission, for future. We are planning for the future and not just for our own.

Let us go forward on the way that has brought us to where we are. God's power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Take time now to jot down a word or two that says charism, gift to you.

What aspect of beauty, grace or gift most appeals to you?

Share why if you wish. Start to see facets of the treasure entrusted to broken vessels.

Listen to all. Did you hear contradictions?

What have you heard that especially appeals to you now?

As you consider your life experience:

Can you agree there is a difference between charism and mission?

Can you see why, because of charism, we can be apostolic to the end of our lives?

Can you see that we discover the truth of our mission statement because of the gift of charism deep in our hearts?

The New Cosmology and How It Impacts our Understanding of Creation

by Jane Maloney

Cosmology and Creation: Aligning Science and Religion

Cosmology is the story of the origins and workings of the universe as it has been told in every age.

Each age has used the religion, science and philosophy of its time in telling the universe story. Until the 1600's, the story of the universe in Europe (and soon, North America) was based upon the Christian doctrine of creation. However, with the rise of the Enlightenment and the rise of empirical science, questions began to emerge. Some believed that the coherence and intelligibility of the creation doctrine no longer held. At the height of 18th century Enlightenment fervor to explain the universe and everything in it in terms of science and reason, the term "cosmology" was developed by the German philosopher Christian Wolff. Wolff's views brought him into conflict with the Pietist (Protestant) theologians of his time.

At this time the traditional doctrine of creation broke down, in part because natural philosophy and natural science stepped in to explain phenomena in the cosmos. As a result the doctrine of creation lost a sense of purpose and meaning which had had a significant place in the former doctrine of creation – a purpose and meaning which could not be subject to empirical study and therefore held no place in Enlightenment beliefs about the origins of the universe.

Modern science and religion, of course, had clashed earlier in the Catholic Church in the Galileo case. The teaching of the Church, based as it was on the story of creation told in the Bible and on doctrinal interpretations of Aquinas, had no time for Galileo's view which was based on observations and measurements as the 'new' science was beginning to use them.

Over the centuries science's account of the story of the universe - its cosmology - evolved, using ever more sophisticated theories backed up by the methods of science. Religion too evolved, not fast enough for some, especially those versed in scientific methodology. Most recently, with the rise of the ecological movement and awareness of the endangerment of the planet, Christian theology's doctrine of creation has been blamed by Lyn Webster for being the cause of planetary destruction.

Webster's contention is that the doctrine's placement of the human at the apex of creation, along with the biblical command that humans should subdue the earth, has led to the destruction of earth and its environment.

From a religious perspective there are various interpretations of the origins and evolution of the universe, ranging from the perspectives of anti-science fundamentalists to those of evolution-conscious Christians. Today many would appreciate the science in the 'new cosmology' but seek to root the story told there in a doctrine of creation rightly understood. Furthermore, many ask: how do I relate this understanding of creation to praxis born of faith? What are the explicitly religious values at stake in urging religious people to assume responsibility for preserving and protecting the earth in response to the new cosmology?

Creation: The Classical View

Many of us, at least in Europe and in North America, received our first ideas about the origins of the universe, along with understandings of how and why we are here, through our parents and/or through the first few chapters of the book of *Genesis* (1:1-3:24).

The ideas we learned were reinforced by recitation of the Apostle's Creed: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth..." Rooted in these traditional Jewish and Christian sources, the doctrine of creation was more fully developed by Augustine, and later by Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*, as well as by other theologians. Among the key tenets of the classical understanding of the doctrine of creation are (according to John B. Webster, Blackwell's Encyclopedia of Modern Thought):

- The world was made from nothing by the agency of God. There is an order in that which is created and humans are at the apex. This hierarchical ordering is set by God and is not capable of being ordered or changed. Humans are given dominion over creation.

- Creation was contingent, brought into being and sustained by the Creator.
- Creation is moving towards its “telos” (aim or goal) in the purpose of God.

Thus, the doctrine of Creation asserts that there is a personal God, that there is a reality apart from God, and that this reality depends upon God for its continuing existence and sense of meaning, value and purpose.

In reflecting on the biblical account of creation, with an eye toward what the new cosmology teaches us, Thomas Berry, quoted in *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on the Earth as Sacred Community* (Mary Evelyn Tucker, ed.), remarks that “the story of the universe is the new sacred story. The Genesis story, however valid its basic teaching, is no longer adequate for our spiritual needs.” But perhaps we can look at the account in Genesis a different way. Instead of saying: “Oh, the creation account in Genesis is just a myth,” perhaps we can say: “The book of Genesis is indeed a myth, a Sacred Myth. Might it be true that the more fully we learn about the universe in which we live, the more deeply we are called upon to use our ever expanding knowledge of the universe as an interpretive tool in endeavoring to derive meaning from the first chapters of Genesis?” Contemporary theologians are asking these questions and arriving at profound new insights.

How the New Cosmology Impacts our Understanding of Creation

Before exploring elements of the new cosmology, it is important to understand some of the key perspectives that informed the “old” cosmology – that is, cosmology as it was understood particularly prior to 1900.

The Old Cosmology: In the time of Aristotle, it was common to view the heavens and earth as two separate realms, with heaven being the perfect realm and earth being the realm of the imperfect. The dualism of spirit vs. matter grew out of this understanding of the universe. In Aristotle’s time, it also was assumed that earth was the center of the cosmos and that earth was fixed in place (i.e., not in motion). This geocentric view of the earth was consistent with Church teaching and, the Vatican claimed, was consistent with biblical narrative.

A revolution in this Aristotelian cosmology took place in the early 1600s. Copernicus and, later, Galileo came along refuting Aristotle, saying that the earth rotates on an axis and revolves around the sun and – still more – that the natural state of matter is to move, and not remain fixed. Galileo’s support of Copernican theory – that the earth was not the center of the universe and that it revolved around the sun – led to an Inquisition by the Vatican that caused Galileo to be imprisoned and then subject to house arrest for the rest of his life. Science and religion were at serious odds with each other.

Soon after Galileo’s discoveries, Newton discovered the law of gravity and the 3 laws of motion that dominated the scientific view of the physical universe for the next three centuries. Newton claimed that the earth and other celestial bodies operate under the same, immutable laws – thereby further crumbling the distinction between heaven and earth. The universe was understood to work in clock-like fashion under the guiding hand of God. The scientific method of the Enlightenment period led to the cosmos being viewed as a machine consisting of perceptible, determined, predictable pieces of matter. Matter was viewed as fixed, static, and mechanistic; nature was viewed as a force to be controlled; and any purpose or meaning to be found in creation was lost in the Enlightenment period.

While these astronomers and scientists were discovering these secrets of the universe, Charles Darwin, in 1859, published *The Origin of the Species*. Darwin described the science of evolution in terms of inheritance, random variation, natural selection, and survival of adapted species. Evolution, of course, led to the human person, who is distinctively characterized by reflective consciousness. In the early 20th century Gregor Mendel, an Augustinian friar, became the father of the new science of genetics. Both Darwin and Mendel emphasized gradual adaptation and survival of the fittest, allowing little room for the new or different to emerge in evolutionary life.

The New Cosmology: In the early 1900s the Milky Way galaxy, of which earth is a part, was considered to be the whole of the universe. In 1924, Edwin Hubble – with the aid of the Hubble telescope – substantiated the existence of billions of other galaxies, each with billions of stars. Around the same time, astronomers – astounded at the expanse of the universe – discovered that the stars in a newly discovered galaxy were moving away from Earth. In 1929 Edwin Hubble again astounded scientists and lay people alike by announcing that – far from being a static entity – the universe was expanding! By the 1960s the Big Bang Theory had

gained acceptance in the scientific community as the best explanation of the origin of the universe. Scientists are quick to note that the Big Bang was not an explosion, but rather a “singularity” before which there was nothing and, after which, there was expansion. In 1998 astronomers announced that the rate of expansion of the universe is accelerating. These discoveries certainly undercut earlier scientific understandings of a universe governed by immutable laws and viewed as a machine consisting of determined, predictable pieces of matter that is fixed and static. In 1998-1999 scientists determined the age of the universe; they determined that the Big Bang took place 13.7 billion years ago.

Back on planet Earth, scientists discovered in the 1960s that Earth is a self-regulating eco-system, a biological organism in its own right. Human beings and the entire community of life on earth share a heritage that goes back to the Big Bang. All of us – from humans, to frogs and birds, to plant life – are constituted by and depend upon the hydrogen that was born in the events of the early universe. The carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen of the world all come from the stars. We humans are literally made from stardust – along with all other life forms on the planet. The new cosmology focuses on these inorganic principles, rather than on the organic dimensions of life – such as evolution of the human – to understand the beginnings of the universe and Earth’s place in that far vaster system.



By the end of the 20th century, according to S. Goldman, “every aspect of the Earth, from its solid core to the uppermost reaches of its atmosphere, was viewed as ‘alive,’ continuously driven by the play of awesome forces.” This “aliveness” is what makes the universe, as we understand it today, open to chance, to the new, as having propensities toward ever greater complexity. It is what makes the universe self-organizing and self-transcending. Within this universe the human has evolved to the point of reflexive self-consciousness. It is this self-consciousness that makes the human race distinctive, but not above or greater than other life forms. We humans are related to all other creatures and all matter by virtue of the fact that we are constituted by the same molecules that originated in the Big Bang, and because we are dependent on earth and its ecosystems for life. Humans are embedded in the matrix of nature; we do not stand above it or control it.

The New Cosmology and Its Impact on Our Understanding of Creation

Three major differences between the scientific underpinnings of the old cosmology and of the new cosmology cause theologians today to look at creation through new lenses and to articulate in new ways a doctrine of creation for today, including how we view the God of creation and the place of humans within creation.

These three major differences or themes are:

- 1) A static, fixed, mechanistic view of the universe vs. the dynamic, open universe of the new cosmology.
- 2) An end to the dualisms of heaven and earth, and spirit and matter
- 3) An understanding of creation and all of God’s creatures as relational and interdependent, rather than as existing in a hierarchy of being that posits the human over and above the material world.

A Dynamic, Open Universe Without Dualisms

The old cosmology, which had a fixed and mechanistic view of the universe, saw creation as a one-time event accomplished by God, rather than as an unceasing process begun by God and characterized by dynamism and evolution. This unceasing process is understood theologically today as the self-transcendence of the world and of human beings in the world. Genesis teaches us that God created in seven days, and then God rested. But the dynamism of the universe tells us, as we have seen, that creation is not a one-time event, completed at the end of seven days. Rather, creation is ongoing, the universe continues to expand, the novel can emerge, and matter and humans continue to evolve through self-transcendence. This understanding stands in opposition even to the more contemporary thought of Darwin and Mendel, proponents of evolution and genetics, who could envision gradual adaptation, but not the emergence of the new in evolutionary terms. Quite a change

in our understanding!

At the time of Vatican II Karl Rahner noted that, in the world as it actually is, “we can understand Creation and Incarnation as two moments and two phases of the one process of God’s self-giving and self-expression,(that is,) the creative Word of God which establishes the world establishes this world to begin with as the materiality which is to become his own or to become the environment of his own materiality.” (*Foundations*, Rahner, 1982). In Rahner’s view, creation and incarnation are inextricably intertwined. God created in order to give God’s self in love through Jesus and the Spirit. This self-bestowal of God, for Rahner, is the meaning and purpose of creation. Denis Edwards, a contemporary theologian who builds on Rahner’s thought, adds that God becomes not only the transcendent “creator from above” but the animating force within creation and the evolutionary process through secondary causes. The dynamism of creation is captured by Edwards when he notes: “It is characteristic of God to create in an emergent and evolutionary way.” (*Divine Action*, p. 9)

Elizabeth Johnson echoes the insights of Denis Edwards. Johnson characterizes her work on the doctrine of creation as a retrieval of the Holy Spirit – who has come to be associated almost solely with the post-resurrection presence of God to humans for purposes of redemption, a Spirit largely divorced from creation other than the Spirit’s hovering over the abyss prior to creation proper. Johnson asserts that “the mystery of the living God, utterly transcendent, is also the creative power who dwells at the heart of the world sustaining every moment of its evolution Seen in this light, the natural world, instead of being divorced from what is sacred, takes on a sacramental character ... Matter bears the mark of the sacred and has itself a spiritual radiance.” (*Quest for the Living God*, p. 188-189)

Just as creation and incarnation are intertwined, so creation and eschatology are intertwined, according to Rahner and Denis Edwards. Edwards views God’s self-bestowal – the meaning and purpose of creation – as also the *goal* of creation and *that which moves creation from within to its goal* (the *Eschaton*) through the power of the Spirit. (*Divine Action*, p. 42) So too, Teilhard de Chardin, whose thought influenced Rahner, understood “genesis” as a process of origination but also as a dynamic – that is, as a 5-step process of unfolding culminating in the Omega Point (Christogenesis). Teilhard’s thought was influenced by his support of evolutionary theory. Ilia Delio in *The Emergent Christ* captures this same eschatological sense of where the God of Creation is leading and drawing His/Her Creation: “As

the infinite, transcendent source of love, God is up ahead, the God of the Future who draws the universe toward a new future of creative union.”

From these theologians we come to view creation in a different light than that of tradition, yet in ways firmly consistent with it. We hear that God created in order to give God’s self – through Jesus and the Spirit – to the world. Creation and incarnation are thus inextricably intertwined. God’s self-bestowal is the meaning and purpose of creation, as well as the animating force that moves creation from within to its goal in the *eschaton*. We discover that creation is not a one-time event but, rather, that the created world is where the Spirit of God continues to create, directing all toward the final fulfillment. The Holy Spirit is the dynamic, creative power that sustains evolution and self-transcendence, and gives the world a sacred character. The dualism of heaven and earth cannot be sustained when we understand that God chose to create this earth in order to join it, and when we recognize that – at the root of the earth’s dynamism and evolution – is the Creator Spirit who is leading all things back to God while lending creatures and all matter a sacred and spiritual character.

An End to the Dualism of Spirit and Matter

As we have learned, the old cosmology polarized the realms of spirit and matter, and separated them. Years of science, however, beginning with the discoveries of Galileo and Newton in particular, led to a new understanding of the relationships between the realms of the heavens (spirit) and the realm of Earth (matter).

The distance between heaven and earth began to shrink, and scientists learned that the two realms are governed by the same set of laws. In the world of science, it became increasingly impossible to separate the two worlds, much less confer a special spiritual significance to one over another.

Christian theology and spirituality, however, was far slower to collapse the dualism of spirit vs. matter. Prior to Vatican II the Catholic Church taught that entering

religious life – that is, renouncing the ways of the world, turning one’s back on materialism, and living a celibate life – put one on a higher spiritual plane than that of a layperson who engaged in earthly pursuits, made money, and married and had sexual intercourse with a spouse. Renunciation of the world of matter and flesh came to define what was spiritual.

The new cosmology, however, not only puts an end to this spirit-matter dualism, it also negates the hierarchy of being that long put the human person above the rest of creation. Theologians who have grappled with the science of the new cosmology, and with how it impacts our understanding of creation, have collapsed the spirit-matter dualism by an appeal to a theology of creation that centers on the Creator Spirit.

The new cosmology tells us that creation is dynamic and evolving, that all of creation – from humans to amoebas, are made from the same building blocks of life created at the Big Bang and upon the explosion of stars. A new doctrine of creation that is consistent with this cosmology unites the realms of spirit and matter, heaven and earth, through a theology of creation that centers on the Creator Spirit, the giver and sustainer of life, and the Spirit whose creative power is at the heart of evolution – lending creatures and all matter a sacred and spiritual character. (Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*)

Human Beings within the Community of Life: the Interrelatedness of All Creation

In a discussion of what he describes as the ecology of inter-relatedness, Diarmuid O’Murchu notes that “nothing in nature can be understood in isolation.

Pollute a local river and you affect the quality of the air, the water, the plant life, the food chain, and the health of every creature that belongs to that bioregion. Interdependence characterizes every aspect of our environment.” (*Evolutionary Faith*, p. 82). He goes on to remind us that all things – from humans, to the oceans, to ants and planets – all unfold from within the relational matrix of creation: we all are made from the same molecules that originated at the time of creation and the beginning of the universe; we are interdependent on stars, and dependent on sunlight as the foundational nourishment of every life form. As human persons, we

must recognize that we do not dwell above the rest of creation; we are embedded in the created world and in the universe and dependent upon them.

What does this tell us about our understanding of ourselves as human persons relative to the rest of creation, and theologically how do we root this self-understanding in a theology of God and creation? Elizabeth Johnson writes: “Quite literally, human beings and all creatures on this planet are made of stardust. The story of biological evolution, moreover, makes evident that we humans share with all other living creatures a common genetic ancestry tracing back to the original single-celled creatures in the ancient seas. Bacteria, pine trees, blueberries, horses, the great gray whales – we are all kin in the great community of life.” (*Quest for the Living God*, p. 184)

To help frame an adequate Christian anthropology in light of the new cosmology and an ecology of inter-relatedness, Johnson encourages a recapturing of the dynamism of the economic Trinity – that is, the Trinity as it expresses the life of God in creation. Johnson writes that the dynamism of the economic Trinity helps us to understand that the life of God – the God who is our ground, sustainer and goal – is a communion that involves “relation to another who is equal.” She goes on to add that this theology of God excludes every kind of domination or subordination. The ramifications of this understanding of God when applied to the role and place of the human in creation dash all claims to dominion or even stewardship rightly understood. Rather, this understanding calls the human person to relate to creation as a member of a living community, where healthy interdependence leads to the flourishing of all.

Johnson further expands on her Trinitarian reflections to note that the Trinity is “a mystery of threefold distinctiveness that abides in communion.” (*Quest for the Living God*, p. 212) She challenges us: Cannot the human race recognize its genuine distinctiveness within the community of life while acknowledging that we are part of a community of life? Can we let go of our tendency to see ourselves as “above” and therefore “better than” other forms of life?

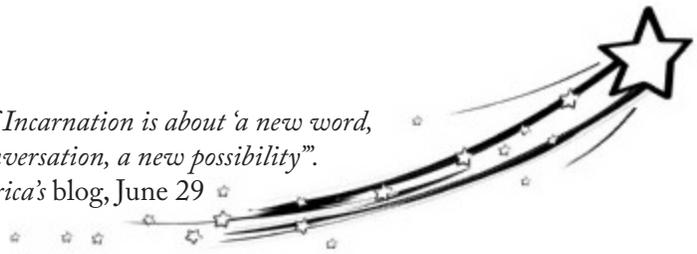
These questions have obvious ramifications for how we live our lives, how we treat our planet and the other creatures that live on it, and how we care for the environment of our earth and the galaxy that is our home. They lead us back to where we began: How do we relate this new understanding of creation to praxis born of faith? What are the religious values at stake in urging religious people to assume responsibility for preserving and protecting the earth in response to the new cosmology?

A New Word

by Barbara Linen, shcj

*“The God of Genesis and of Incarnation is about ‘a new word,
a new verb, a new conversation, a new possibility’”.*

From *America’s* blog, June 29



*“... probing the meaning and relevance of our Cornelian legacy... to deepen understandings of C’s gift,
including the intrinsic interconnections among incarnation, creation and justice with compassion —
to foster a renewed understanding of the mystery of God’s presence and action in us...”*

From Goal 1.1, American Province Plan

What is the legacy – what is it that draws us today, that fosters a renewed understanding of the mystery of God with us? The ‘new cosmology’ is for many people a new word or conversation that draws people further into the mystery. For others, the theology of creation is every bit as attractive. The two need not be seen in opposition; they can be seen as complementary.

The new cosmology has largely been the work of scientists, many of whom are also religious. Mary Evelyn Tucker is a good example. From her early work with Fr. Thomas Berry down to the present she highlights how religion’s insights contribute to deeper understanding.

The old cosmology, that is, older understandings of the universe, including humans’ place in it, were articulated in older religious contexts, contexts that came from different notions of science – and indeed of revelation. In the modern age conversations between scientists and theologians began in confrontation with each other. In the 1700s the Enlightenment philosophers wanted to free humans from the ‘superstitions’ of religion, and give science and human reason the highest place. The theory of evolution met with fierce opposition from religious people, opposition which continues in some quarters influenced by fundamentalist understandings of scripture.

The theological understanding of creation has not been unaffected by what science has provided about the workings of the universe. Scientific work is often full of wonder and awe at the workings of the universe. Religion’s doctrine of creation is articulated now in ways that do not interfere with scientific insight, but which can enhance it. A key insight from Aquinas’ theology is about the pure gratuitousness of the overflowing love of God for all creation.

Cornelia’s gift was in her total reliance on God. The mystery of God’s love drew her to a love full of action answering the needs of others. The mystery of God draws us in our context to the same love given for others and for the earth.

Greater understanding and collaboration between people in science and those in religion is taking place; a greater sense of human responsibility for justice with compassion has emerged. Caring for the earth and for people, especially those most in need, has power to bring us together. As we prepare go forward let us be open to the new conversations, the new possibilities for action that God holds out for us. It is the mystery of God’s love, the ongoing gift of creation that draws us.

Three Excerpts from “The Banquet of Faith” — an address given by Sister Elizabeth Johnson, csj to the joint Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, August 2, 2008

selected by Roseanne McDougall, shcj

“The Banquet of Faith,” Sister Elizabeth Johnson’s address to the LCWR in 2008 is a meditation or as she refers to it, a feast, in which Johnson reflects for us on the Triune life of God from the perspectives of Scripture and Creation. Johnson’s words may be helpful to us as we continue to move towards a deeper integration of our Society charism. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, Johnson says:



“Forgiving does not mean condoning harmful actions, or ceasing to criticize and resist them. But it does mean tapping into a wellspring of compassion that encompasses the hurt and sucks the venom out, so we can go forward making a positive contribution, without hatred. This is the work of the Spirit, reconciling at the deepest level, so that community coheres and witnesses in a grace filled way....”

A second insight from this course of the feast addresses our grief, grief at the loss of beloved persons, of personal energies, of cherished patterns of life. The creed affirms the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come. There is a simple logic here, one that begins with the Maker who creates heaven and earth and ends with the Giver of life who brings about something more after death. In both cases we begin with virtually nothing: no universe in the beginning; no future for the dead at the end. In the first instance, the Spirit hovers over the chaos to create the world. In the end, the Spirit moves again in a new act of creation; the Spirit carries persons through their earthly perishing into new life. According to this logic, hope in eternal life for oneself, others, and the whole cosmos is not some curiosity tacked on as an appendage to faith, but is faith in the one living God brought to its radical conclusion. It is faith in the Creator that does not stop halfway but follows the road consistently to the end, trusting that the God who had the first word will have the last, and it is the same word: let there be life. Divine purpose in creating the world is not annihilation but transformation into new creation. All the biblical images of the end time ~ the wedding feast, light, banquet, harvest, rest, singing, homecoming, reunion, tears wiped away, seeing face to face, and knowing as we are known ~ these all point to a living communion in God’s own life. We die not into nothingness but into the embrace of God. The Holy Spirit, Giver of Life grounds this consolation even when tears of grief are streaming down our cheeks.

Circling back to the beginning of the creed where we considered the evolving universe, we can see that our human hope for eternal life actually expresses the dynamism of the universe itself. Billions of years before our appearance in evolution, the cosmos was already seeded with promise, pregnant with surprise. Our religious hope embodies this cosmic yearning. Rather than being an imaginary ideal projected onto an indifferent universe, as much modern and postmodern thought maintains, our hope faithfully carries onward the universe’s own perennial movement toward the future, promised but unknown. Bodies break down, chaos and disintegration ensue; but the Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life, has something unimaginably more in mind.”

The complete address is available at:

https://lcwr.org/sites/default/files/calendar/attachments/2008_Keynote_Address-E_Johnson.pdf

A Reflection on Incarnational Spirituality

Caroline Conway, SHCJ

When Cornelia Connelly chose the name Society of the Holy Child Jesus, she left us a lasting reminder that ours is an incarnational spirituality. She loved and praised the God who came among us in human form, lived our life and promised that his Spirit would remain with us always. She assured us that in, with and for such a God “we can do all things”.

SHCJ sources describe Cornelia as a beautiful, gifted woman who developed and used well her unique gifts of mind and spirit. As we know, hers was a strong, joyous, flexible spirit. She was drawn to the love of a creative God — giver of all life, goodness and beauty. She used her own artistic gifts to sing the praises of the God of loveliness. She was at home in the whole world and loved all that the Creator had made.

Much of Cornelia’s life was lived in places of natural beauty — Penn’s Woods, under Louisiana’s live oaks hung with Spanish moss, in the vineyards and fields of Italy, by the sea at St. Leonards and among the verdant lawns and trees of Mayfield. She cherished natural beauty and knew first-hand that it nourished body, mind and spirit.



Cornelia’s childhood and youth were lived in comfortable surroundings where she lacked for nothing, was well educated and developed her many gifts. Later, due to financial reverses, she and her young family would live in reduced circumstances. We know that Cornelia, rather than being disturbed at financial loss, rejoiced to live a more simple way of life. She learned to use material goods carefully and to value simple joys with her children. Later in her own practical, motherly way she would describe frugality for her Sisters as “simply the ordinary good fare for health and strength and good for all the essentials of life and health”.

Cornelia’s was a pioneering, adventurous spirit. If she were alive today, she would, no doubt, take delight in space explorations and the scientific discoveries of an ever-expanding universe and would see the Creator God still at work in it all. She would be in tune with theologian Karl Rahner who saw Christ as “the dynamic life of the world”. And she would, I believe, be saddened, as we are, by a world in which natural disasters are becoming more frequent and destructive as the climate changes. She would suffer with so many people who have lost everything.

Do you think Cornelia might remind us once again that “difficulties exist only to be overcome”? Certainly we live in difficult times that demand great courage in overcoming obstacles.

Well, dear reader, thank you for persevering to the end of this article. You may not have learned anything new but maybe you might draw some inspiration from remembering Cornelia’s strong spirit. Perhaps we may go forward with her clan of heart “to foster a renewed understanding of the mystery of God’s presence and action in us and in the cosmos as we are coming to know it and a strengthened response to the social and ecological needs of our time.” (Province Goal 1.1)



Society of the Holy Child Jesus

American Province

<http://shcj.org/amer/index.html>
<https://corneliaconnellylibrary.org/>
<http://ecospiritualityresources.com/>

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