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March 16, 2013

Christ in Evolution

Theology was never meant to be abstract speculation about God. From earliest times, a relationship between theology and cosmology provided the framework for talk about God. Christian theology was constructed within the axial age of consciousness whereby the human person as autonomous, free and transcendent emerged against the stable background of a fixed universe. In the Middle Ages theology was known as the “Queen of Science” since all knowledge was to lead to God. Creation bore the footprints (*vestigia*) of God and understanding the natural world could help deepen one’s faith. The influence of Greek philosophy on Christian theology peaked in the Middle Ages where Aristotelian cosmology was joined to Christian theology in the brilliant synthesis of Thomas Aquinas. Both Thomas and Bonaventure studied logic, natural philosophy, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy along with theology. Their cosmos was the Ptolemaic universe with its perfectly ordered and hierarchical arrangement: the planets and sun orbiting the earth, and the heavens surrounding the planets. The immutability of cosmic order was manifested in the Ptolemaic universe where the human person was center of the universe. To know God (religion) for the medievalists was to know the world created by God (science).

The first major rift between Science and Religion came when Nicholas of Cusa and later Nicholas Copernicus proposed a theory of heliocentrism which meant the earth revolved around the sun. Up to this time the earth was considered to be the center of a stable cosmic order and

the human person, created in the image of God, was at the center of the earth. The Church, however, was not ready for the major upheaval of a moving earth. If the earth moved around the sun then the human person was no longer center of a stable earth but simply part of a spinning planet. How could this finding be reconciled with the Genesis account where the human person was created on the sixth day in God's image? How would sin and salvation be understood? Galileo argued that the Bible and the natural world both come from God and are meant to be in harmony. Cardinal Baronius remarked that the Bible teaches "how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go." Once the theory of heliocentrism became the law of the planets, the Church found itself in a vulnerable position with regard to science. The rise of modern science, following the Protestant Reformation and its emphasis on sin and personal salvation, caused an alienation from the earth in both Catholic and Protestant circles. Science became detached from its Christian roots and developed as a self-sufficient discipline to explain natural causes and events.

The resistance of the Church to heliocentrism and the loss of human centrality in creation spawned a radical empiricism and a milieu for scientific materialism to emerge. The Jesuit-trained philosopher René Descartes tried to preserve God from the clutches of a changing world by locating true knowledge not in creation but in the self-thinking subject. While up to and through the Middle Ages, creation was a source of revelation and knowledge of God, Descartes' separation of matter and spirit shifted the locus of knowledge to the individual human being in his or her personal subjectivity. The transcendent One (or principle of unity associated with the name "God") became identified with the immanent subject. Whereas in the Middle Ages the power to unify the many came from the one God who created heaven and earth, in the Enlightenment the power to unify the many was sought in the individual. The changing

scientific world view threw the God of Jesus Christ into doubt and disbelief. This transition of knowledge from object to subject imposed a burden on the human person to make sense of the world by rational thought alone. As the new science story emerged between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, the human person was not part of the cosmic story. In Newton's world, the sovereign, omnipotent God governed the world from above and the cosmos ran like a machine according to internal laws and mechanisms. Whereas the ancient universe gave the human person a special role in creation as image of God, the world of modern science subsumed the human person into the dazzling world of scientific data. Essentially, nature was stripped of its sacred character. As the cosmos assumed a new world picture through modern science, religion remained tied to the medieval cosmos. Christian doctrine was inscribed within the framework of a perfect, immutable, hierarchical and anthropocentric order. It was within this order that Anselm's satisfaction theory was framed, namely, the reason for the Incarnation was to repay the sin incurred by Adam and Eve.

The most fundamental shift in our understanding of the cosmos is the move from the vision of a universe launched essentially in its present form by the hand of the Creator at the beginning of time to a vision of the cosmos as a dynamic, unfolding chemical process, immensely large in both time and space. The new science of the twentieth century ushered in a radically new view of the cosmos that continues to unfold through the use of scientific discovery and advanced technology. Our universe is about 13.7 billion years old, with a future of billions of years before us. Some scientists estimate that the future age of the universe is about 100 trillion years, although the sun will die out long before then. It is a large universe stretching light years in diameter. Scientists suggest that our universe may be of many universes that occupy

space. Our own galaxy, the Milky Way consists of billions of stars, and stretching about 100,000 light years in diameter. The galaxies are often grouped into clusters—some having as many as 2,000 galaxies together. Ours is one of 200 billion galaxies. Evolution and quantum physics are the two main pillars of the new science that challenge us today. Evolution is a movement or process from simple forms to more complex forms. From non-living forms, we move to living forms of great variety. The Jesuit scientist and priest, Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), a renowned paleontologist, described this “biological ascent” as a movement toward more complexified life forms in which, at critical points in the evolutionary process, qualitative differences emerge. Evolution was not merely an explanation of physical life for Teilhard; it ushered in a whole new *weltanschauung* that affects every aspect of created life. Evolution, he maintained, is neither theory nor particular fact but a “dimension” to which all thinking in whatever area must conform.¹ What makes the world in which we live specifically modern—what distinguishes it from past worlds—is evolution, a word which now defines almost all of science as a history of systems. As a process, evolution means that nature does not operate only according to fixed laws but to the dynamic interplay of law, chance and deep time.

The human person is not a ready-made fact but the outflow of billions of years of evolution. In 1940 Teilhard completed most important work, *The Phenomenon of Man*, where he described the fourfold sequence of the evolution of galaxies, Earth, life, and consciousness. This amazingly fine-tuned universe and the embodied persons that we are have a long history; all the constituents that have come together to form our own physical being were present in the Big Bang, at the beginning of this universe. To realize that we humans are part of a larger process which involves long spans of developmental time brings a massive change to all of our

knowledge and beliefs. We are not simply products of evolution; we are evolution come to consciousness, the arrow of evolution's direction.

Evolution changes the way we understand Christianity and the phenomenon of religion itself. Christianity is part of a larger cosmic religious phenomenon. It did not arise *de novo* (or descend from heaven) but arose out of an evolution of consciousness (axial consciousness) along with other world religions. If we continue to see Christianity separate and exclusive from the larger whole, we risk losing its illuminative value. Teilhard wrote:

Our Christology is still expressed in exactly the same terms as those which three centuries ago could satisfy those whose outlook on the cosmos it is now physically impossible for us to accept. . . . What we now have to do without delay is to modify the position occupied by the central core of Christianity—and this precisely in order that it may not lose its illuminative value.²

There are two ways we can understand a personal God in a personalizing universe: historically and cosmologically. These ways are not exclusive of each other but the West has focused on the historical while the East has emphasized the cosmological. The historical way looks at the human history of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, that is, the context and community in which Jesus was born and lived out his public ministry. The cosmological way seeks to understand the person of Jesus Christ within the larger context of reality; the historical is understood within the larger framework of the cosmological. Among some patristic and medieval writers such as Origen, Irenaeus of Lyons, Hugh of St. Victor and Bonaventure, the cosmological held priority over the historical. When a dispute arose in the Middle Ages about

the relationship between being and goodness, the authors of the *Summa Fratris Alexandri* argued that relegating goodness to being in the Godhead would give rise to a “cosmo-morphic” error.³ Being *is* goodness and the highest good is love; God *is* love (1Jn 4:8).

It is no surprise that the Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus saw love and not sin as the reason for the Incarnation. Scotus looked at the larger picture of reality, not the narrow picture of human sin. He saw an intimate connection between creation and Incarnation, grounded in the infinite love of God. Love is the reason for everything that exists and God is love. God wanted to express Godself outwardly in a creature who would be a masterpiece and love God perfectly in return. This is Scotus’s doctrine of the primacy of Christ. Christ is the first in God’s intention to love. Creation is not an independent act of divine love that was, incidentally, followed up by divine self-revelation in the covenant. Rather, the divine desire to become incarnate was part of the divine plan from all eternity: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . . . He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:15,17). Christ is the masterpiece of love, the “*summum opus Dei*.” Because creation is centered on Incarnation, every leaf, cloud, fruit, animal and person is an outward expression of the Word of God in love. When Jesus comes as the Incarnation of God, there is a “perfect fit” because everything has been made to resemble Christ.⁴ Sun, moon, trees, animals and stars all have life in Christ, the personal Word of Love, through whom all things are made (cf. Jn 1:1).⁵ As the *motif* or pattern of creation, Christ is the perfect divine-human-cosmic communion who exemplifies the meaning and purpose of all creation, namely, the praise and glory of God in a communion of love.

The emphasis on love and not sin as the reason for Christ was obscured by the need to define the Incarnation more precisely. The Church Fathers defended the Incarnation at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 as a true union of divinity and humanity, defining “person” and “nature” and the union of natures without division, separation or confusion. Jesus Christ is one person subsisting in two natures: divine and human. This definition presupposes an understanding of “person” and “nature” based on Greek philosophy. Since the fifth century, Christian orthodoxy has maintained that divine and human natures are fully unified in Jesus Christ (according to the First Council of Ephesus in 431) but that the two natures also remain distinct (according to the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451); a oneness of person subsisting in two natures. The two natures, distinct but unified, participate in an exchange of properties between divinity and humanity; the properties of the divine Word can be ascribed to the man Jesus Christ, and the properties of the man Jesus Christ can be predicated of the Word (*communicatio idiomatum*). However, there remains disagreement on the exact dynamic of this incarnational union. Those leaning toward an Antiochene Christology stressed the distinction of natures and therefore a more tightly regulated communication of properties with an emphasis on the humanity of Christ; those adherents of Alexandrian Christology underscored the unity of Jesus Christ and therefore a more complete communication of properties, emphasizing the divinity of Christ.

But what exactly *are* “divine nature” and “human nature” based on modern physics and biology? What is human personhood in an evolving cosmos? These are difficult questions and are not easily answered without engaging modern physics and biology, including quantum physics, chaos theory, systems biology, genetics and neuroscience. F. LeRon Shults took up this task in his book *Science and Christology* but there is still much work needed to develop a

contemporary systematic understanding of Jesus Christ that is consonant with reality as science now understands it. The modern understanding of personhood today cannot ignore consciousness or the complex interaction of mind-brain-body and the evolution of these.

Although the evolutionary nature of personhood is complex, we can say that divine love comes to explicit consciousness in a way that belongs entirely and originally to the person, Jesus of Nazareth. Divine love explodes in the person of Jesus in an explicit way so that he is recognized as the Christ, *the* cosmic Person, the paradigm of relationality. The whole process of evolution that leads to the birth of Jesus is punctuated by cataclysmic events, violent explosions and catastrophic extinctions, followed by periods of relative stability. This emergence is not some dramatic leap into existence. On the contrary, God's appearance is hidden in the depth of Big Bang evolution. Jesus appears not simply as the perfect union of divine, human, and cosmic natures but on the edge of emergent chaos.

In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a new God-consciousness of love becomes radically expressed in a way that departs from other religions. This new religious consciousness evokes a new way of action. Jesus is a new Big Bang in evolution, an explosion of love that ignites a new way of thinking about God, creation and future. The Gospels open with the word *metanoia*, repentance, indicating a summons to a complete change of life for both the individual and society. This change is not a single event but a permanent newness of life. Christianity emerges out of older concepts of order; it is more dynamic and modern than the classical hierarchic pyramid with God at the top, humans in the middle, and plant and animal life below. The new Christian order is not about fixity of place in the hierarchy but inclusiveness within the whole concept of order itself, a *holarchy*. Jesus' intimate experience of God and his self-identity with

the Father (“The Father and I are one”) empower him to act in the name of love by healing and reconciling all that is unloved in human persons. He gathers together what is scattered, healing the sick, eating with sinners, speaking with women, dining with tax collectors and Gentiles, dealing with each person as one called into greater wholeness. The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:4-26) shows the new religious consciousness that erupts in this man from Galilee. For many Christians, sin and belief in Jesus Christ go together; if Adam had not sinned Christ would not have come. This relationship between Adam and Christ, however, is a Pauline development that was enhanced by later writers. Jesus’ approach to sin in the Gospels is in the form of healing; power goes out from him that brings to life what is disconnected or diseased (cf. Lk 7:36-50; Mk 1:40-45). The emphasis is on wholeness. Jesus’ God-centered life shows a way of relating to others that makes wholes where there are divisions. His love gathers and heals what is scattered and apart. He draws people into community and empowers them to live the law of love.

Jesus emphasized the priority of human values over conventionally “religious” ones. He preached against religious alienation and challenged abstract religious laws. When some disciples complained that he was gathering food on the Sabbath he said: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Jesus consistently opted for the human person against the claims of legalistic religion. When he had to choose between the good of a suffering human person, such as healing the blind man with mud (“Go, wash in the pool of Siloam”) and the claims of formal and established legalism (“This man is not from God because he does not keep the Sabbath”), he chose the human person (Jn 9:1-41). Throughout the New Testament, we see the explicit contrast between mere interior religiosity that is fixed to laws and abstract ideas, and the love that makes whole, uniting humans to humans and humans to God. Jesus ushered in

not a new religion but a new humanism. In love, God gives himself to us without reservation, becoming one of us. Love is the creative secret of God, the hidden mystery, manifest and active in all aspects of life but especially in the human person.⁶

Jesus was a “wholemaker,” bringing together those who were divided, separated or left out of the whole. He initiated a new way of “catholicity”, a gathering together of persons in love.⁷ At the end of his life he prayed: “That they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me” (Jn 17:21). He gathered together what was divided and confronted systems that diminished, marginalized or excluded human persons. He challenged others not by argument or attack but out of a deep center of love. Jesus said, “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt 5:39). Faith in Christ should move us to be loving and free persons of humankind, to create new wholes and in doing so, to create a new future for the human person, for society and for the whole earthly community.

Teilhard did not view the Good News of Jesus Christ as an historical event. Rather, he suggested that *someone* and not something is coming to birth at the heart of evolution. He used the term Christogenesis to indicate that evolution is, from the point of Christian faith, the birth of the cosmic Person. In this respect, Christianity does not begin with the historical person of Jesus but with Big Bang evolution. The primordial soup of the early big bang was a sea of particles and energy that quickly formed into fundamental molecules and forces. The ubiquity of evolutionary convergence in view of the exuberant diversity of elements on both biological and cosmological levels impelled Teilhard to identify convergence as a principal factor of evolution. He understood the science of evolution as the explanation for the physical world and viewed the

mystery of God within evolution. He recognized that there is a unifying influence in the whole evolutionary process, a centrating factor that holds the entire process together and moves it forward toward greater complexity and unity.

The process of evolution from the physical sciences may be one of cosmogenesis and biogenesis but from the point of Christian faith it is “Christogenesis,” a “coming-to-be” of Christ.⁸ Christogenesis means that evolution is not mere chance or random processes; it involves directed change, organized becoming, patterned process and cumulative order.⁹ Teilhard posited Christ as the future fullness of the whole evolutionary process, the “centrating principle,” the “pleroma” and “Omega point” where the individual and collective adventure of humanity finds its end and fulfillment, and where the consummation of the world and consummation of God converge. What we anticipate as the future of evolution is “the mysterious synthesis of the uncreated and the created—the grand completion of the universe in God.”¹⁰

A universe in the process of christification is a personalizing universe by which a consciousness of God and a consciousness of love become increasingly one. In this sense all religions participate in the evolution of the cosmic Person—“christogenesis”—through their own particular forms of worship, prayer, ritual and belief. Teilhard, however, saw a particular role for Christianity in evolution. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ mean that, from a Christian perspective, evolution has purpose and aim. It is not a mere plurality of unrelated things but a true unity in divine love incarnate.¹¹ What may appear from the sciences as a mechanical process is, on another level, a limitless mystery of productive love. God’s creative love freely calls from within the world a created love that can freely respond to God’s creative call. That created love is embodied in Christ in whom all of creation finds its goal.

If Incarnation is what this universe is about, then evolution is an unfolding theophany, an unveiling of divinity in creation. Trinity marks the whole of evolution, or we might say, the whole of evolution is the unfolding of Trinity. Being is the overflowing fountain of love, expressing itself in unfolding space-time Word and energized by the Spirit of new creation. God is not so much behind creation as its cause, but in front of creation as its future. God is the name of love's excess which gives rise to being and transcends being. God, therefore, is always the more of what any finite being can express. God emerges from within as ever newness in love and is the future of every new love. What happens in Jesus is anticipation of the future of humanity and of the cosmos; not annihilation of creation but its radical transformation through the power of God's life-giving Spirit. In Jesus God arrives as the future; we see in the life of Jesus the creative power of love and the promise of new life. The world is an evolving community in which self-identity is found less in oneself than in one's ongoing relations to others. The ideal of human interpersonal relations is not individual self-fulfillment in distinction from another but mutual transformation through self-gift to the other and reception of the other as gift.

Christianity *is* the religion of cosmic Personalization because it is a religion of love which is centered not on the individual but on the collective whole—the community. Christ is the cosmic person—the communal whole—coming to birth in evolution. Teilhard posited a dynamic view of God and the world in the process of becoming *something more* than what it is because the universe is grounded in the Personal *center of Christ*. The Incarnation speaks to us of a world that is now being personalized in and through the human person, who is no longer center but the *arrow* of the evolutionary process. The destiny of humanity and the aim of the

cosmos are intertwined in the mystery of Christ. What took place in the life of Jesus must take place in our lives as well, if creation is to move forward toward its completion and transformation in God. God evolves the universe and brings it to its completion through the cooperation of human beings. Thus, it matters what a human person does and how we live in relation to God, for only through our actions can we encounter God.

Teilhard spoke of the human person as a “co-creator.”¹² By this he meant we are not passing through a stormy world like a ship on a turbulent sea; rather our choices and decisions shape the future direction of evolution. We are created to evolve into a new future; the choices we make in love and for love co-create our future. When we see ourselves as part of a larger whole, we act on behalf of the whole of which we are part. Christian evolution is thinking and seeing in a new way. The Christian is one who is connected through the heart to the whole of life, attuned to the deeper intelligence of nature, and called forth irresistibly by the Spirit to creatively express his or her gifts in the evolution of self and the world. Jesus is brought into being through community and participates in the co-creation of it. Hence what is truly Christological, revealing of divine incarnation and salvific power, must reside in connectedness and not in single individuals. We are called to live on the cusp of this evolutionary breakthrough, and this requires our conscious participation as co-creative agents of love—to be Christ anew; to penetrate the truth of the Christ mystery within ourselves, in other persons and non-human creatures as well. To live the mystery of Christ is to live in the freedom of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17), recognizing the connectedness that is a basic reality of our existence. We are always becoming part of a greater whole, trusting that God continues to create in and through us.

Teilhard's Christogenic universe invites us to broaden our understanding of Christ; not to abandon what we profess or proclaim in word and practice but to allow these beliefs to open us up to a world of evolution of which we are vital members. He urged Christians to participate in the process of Christogenesis, to risk, get involved and aim towards union with others, for the entire creation is waiting to give birth to God's promise—the fullness of love (Rom 8:19-20). We are not only to recognize evolution but make it continue in ourselves.¹³ He emphasized that the role of the Christian is to divinize the world in Jesus Christ, to “christify” the world by our actions, by immersing ourselves in the world, plunging our hands we might say into the soil of the earth and touching the roots of life. He posited a “mysticism of action” in a universe moved and sustained by God.¹⁴ Before, he said, the Christian thought that s/he could attain God only by abandoning everything. But we realize now that we cannot be saved except through the universe and as a continuation of the universe. We must make our way to heaven *through* earth.¹⁵ Christianity is the power of gathering into community what is yet unrelated or unloved. It is a religion of evolution and a religion of the earth where each person or living thing is part of a larger whole. Thus, we must work together to harness the energies of love for the forward movement of evolution. We must renounce the idea that each individual person contains the ultimate value of one's existence and realize that our purpose consists in serving the continuation of the evolution process in the universe. Teilhard wrote: “We must advance *all together* in a direction in which *all together* we can join and find completion in a spiritual renovation of the earth.”¹⁶ Christian evolution means that what began in Jesus must advance toward Omega, the fullness of Christ. We are flowing in a stream of love but only when we become conscious of this stream and act from this center of consciousness will Omega be realized.

Notes

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- ¹ Robert North, *Teilhard and the Creation of the Soul* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publ. Co., 1967).
- ² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt, 1971), 77.
- ³ Kevin Keane, “Why Creation? Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas on God as Creative Good,” *Downside Review* 93 (1975): 116.
- ⁴ Mary Beth Ingham, *Scotus for Dunces: An Introduction to the Subtle Doctor* (New York: Franciscan Institute, 2012), 264.
- ⁵ Ingham, *Scotus for Dunces*, 266.
- ⁶ Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1979), 147.
- ⁷ For a greater explanation of these ideas see Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 59 – 71.
- ⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row 1959), 297 - 298.
- ⁹ In his book *Non Zero Sum: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Vintage, 2001), Robert Wright states that despite the scientific materialist, there is ample evidence for direction in nature. He writes: “People who see a direction in human history, or in biological evolution, or both, have often been dismissed as mystics or flakes. In some ways, it's hard to argue that they deserve better treatment. . . .Through natural selection, there arise new "technologies" that permit richer forms of non-zero-sum interaction among biological entities: among genes, or cells, or animals, or whatever. . .both organic and human history involve the playing of ever-more-numerous, ever-larger, and ever-more-elaborate non-zero-sum games. . . . History, even if its basic direction is set, can proceed at massive, wrenching human cost. Or it can proceed more smoothly — with costs, to be sure, but with more tolerable costs. It is the destiny of our species — and this time I mean the inescapable destiny, not just the high likelihood — to choose. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/w/wright-nonzero.htm>.
- ¹⁰ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Les Directions de l'Avenir* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), 97.
- ¹¹ Zachary Hayes, *A Window to the Divine: a study of Christian creation theology* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), 91.
- ¹²The term “co-creator” is a term also put forth by Lutheran theologian Philip Hefner to describe his theology of the created co-creator. See *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
- ¹³Ursula King, *Christ in All Things*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 80.
- ¹⁴ King, *Christ in All Things*, 93.
- ¹⁵Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, 93.
- ¹⁶ Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 244 - 45.

