

Revelation of the Cosmos

Given August 10, 2014 at the Middlebury Congregational Church, Middlebury, Vermont

The Celtic stream of Christianity teaches that there are two sources of revelation. The first source --- the one with which we are most familiar --- is the "Book of Scripture". We just read from that book. Yet there is another revelation even more primary. It is the "Book of Creation" --- a reading directly from the created Universe. The Celts believed that both sources of revelation are essential if we are to know and understand the Creator.

As Christians, we are taught to listen to scripture but have been less adept at listening to creation. In the words of John Philip Newell, the great Celtic Spirituality teacher, "To listen to Scripture without creation is to lose the cosmic vastness of the song." It is too small. But "to listen to creation without Scripture is to lose the personal intimacy of the voice." In other words it lacks the human context and story which gives meaning.

This separation of the physical and spiritual exists mainly in the West but not exclusively. We see everywhere the result of this separation --- primarily in the devastation of the Earth and in the lost of bio-diversity as we have tended to place more value on the human aspect of creation --- all else being for our use.

If there is a Creator that primarily or even exclusively cares about humans that Creator would be incredibly inefficient. The sheer magnitude of the creation is overdone for our use. Why all of this abundance? And why wait over 13 Billion years to introduce humans to the scene?

So the question for me is how to bring the two revelations into balance. Jesus was balanced in that he not only knew Old Testament Scripture but also prayed out of doors surrounded by nature. He constantly used images of birds and fishes, other living creatures, as well as plants and trees in his teaching. We still have a lot to learn from him in this regard.

I have to confess that when it comes to science, I am a complete novice. Yet I have a come to have deep desire to listen to the Book of Creation as much as I have listened to the Book of Scripture. I have known for a long time that my spiritual practice should include listening to nature in the usual ways of being close to the natural world. But I also now believe there is a need for a more scientific understanding. I

have been so out of balance between the two revelations that recently I have found myself setting Scripture aside in order to learn more about creation through the world of science.

What I have learned is startling. In the past thirty years amazing discoveries have emerged from the fields of cosmology and astrophysics. I am in awe, absolutely fascinated by our new knowledge of the Universe. These discoveries are breathtaking, beautiful, groundbreaking, cracking open the mysteries of the Universe. There are two I will mention because they have great significance for how Christians frame existence.

One that I know you have heard about is the 2012 discovery of the Higgs boson particle confirming the existence of a field that permeates the entire Universe. It was big news at the time. This is the particle some have called the elusive “God Particle” because everything that exists is apparently connected to the Higgs. It is this particle that allows for the conditions for matter to form. Nothing would exist without it. In a theological stretch we might say it is the way God created.

The second discovery is more recent. It is the confirmation, just last March, of the theory of inflation potentially validating that our Universe not only began with a “Big Bang” --- a really rapid big bang --- but it was a bang followed by a huge instantaneous inflation. Our Universe inflated from nothing to the size of a galaxy in a fraction of a second. So the question is, “What is the creativity that brought forth this birth?”

These startling new understandings are possible because of technology. Our ability to measure and explore the Universe is always expanding and with it our consciousness should expand. We now know things that were not know even a generation ago. For instance, a space probe, the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe, developed at Princeton, has been mapping the Universe back to about 380,000 years after the Big Bang. This is when light began to appear. We can't see all the way to the origin of the Universe --- it was too high temperature for photons to escape. We know much more about the origin of the Universe.

What is significant for us is that we now know that the “Big Bang” didn't just happen back then, 13.8 billions of years ago, but is continuing even today. *We are in the big bang*. This is an incredible revelation --- the Big Bang never ended. It goes on, ever unfolding. *We are the Big Bang*, its latest manifestation, right now ... and now ... and now. It is like the water flowing over the Middlebury falls --- always present. Our Universe is ever expanding and moving out in every direction and dimension. Nothing is

static. All of creation is dynamic. If this is true and there is a Creator then that Creator is with us every instant. And we are actively participating in creation. What we do...*matters*.

This has tremendous implications for Christianity. Yet the more I try to incorporate this cosmic perspective into Christianity, the more questions I have. There is a gap of about five hundred year separating science and religion. It isn't easy to weave them back together. There is resistance and fear. Yet I know it is really important to appropriately situate ourselves as citizens of the cosmos while at the same time living the Christian story of love and compassion.

Understanding the Universe can help us understand who and what we should love. It can help us to know where to place our compassion. I would argue that reuniting science and religion is essential if we are to be the new human foretold by the life of Jesus. At this point in history, when the human has had such a profound impact on the Earth, reframing our perspective is perhaps the only way humanity can survive. The Earth is in crisis and human beings are the key to forestalling its further degradation.

Thomas Berry, writes that the Earth (i.e., nature, the cosmos) must be our primary context so that the fullness of our relationships are to God, the Universe, Earth, living systems, as well as to each other in order to have a more comprehensive and life affirming theology.

The Christian church hasn't even begun to absorb this new perspective, much less formulate a coherent theological response. The Franciscan monk, Richard Rohr, is one who has, and recently wrote in an essay, "The incarnation of God did not happen in Bethlehem two thousand years ago....two thousand years ago was just when some of us started to take it seriously. The incarnation actually happened approximately (13.8) billion years ago..." By taking "it" seriously, he means the Universe, the great revelation of light, mass, time, space which ignited the promise of atoms, galaxies, sun and planets, oceans, rivers, trees, butterflies, you and me...here... now.

Father Rohr goes on in his essay stating that, "For some, this understanding represents a significant shaking of religious belief. Many Christians have seen the world as inert, non-enchanted, unholy and even dangerous and evil. As if God's creation could be separate from God!" If there is a Creator, a cause, a force behind all of this beauty in the Universe --- and I am not sure how there couldn't be something -- then could there be any separation?

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth." Genesis 1

God who created everything out of nothing. This gives us a way to think of the great flaring forth of the Universe. The Big Bang was when God materialized, revealing the great creative energy that underlies all that is. Then, two thousand years ago, marks the human revelation in the person of Jesus. Jesus was actually a latecomer to the creation because humans are the newcomers to the Universe. This perspective moves us beyond the limits of our human centered view to a more universal one forming a complete framework of creation. It is in the best sense a Christian framework that finally will work for all because we are all children of the great flaring forth, born of the stars, connected at the inmost fibers of our being. There is no separation. We are connected. We have always been connected to everything in the cosmos, everything on the Earth, to all the creatures, and to each other, without exception. Even the air we breathe contains molecules that have been breathed by every person that has lived including Buddha, Moses, and, of course, Jesus. This makes each moment, each breath, of our existence important and powerful as we link to all that has come before and to all that will follow.

A few years ago my husband and I visited friends in Washington D.C. One evening we were having dinner with the couple and their oldest son, Will, a teenager who was about seventeen at the time. Somehow the subject had come around to religion. I found myself describing our church. I don't think Will knew much about religion. He certainly didn't go to church. After listening a few minutes, Will looked at me intently and asked, "Why do you go to Church?" It was a great question and he was obviously very interested in the answer. It put me on the spot so I had to take a minute to think about it. I said, "I go because I think it helps me to be a better person." This answer resonated. "That's a good answer", he said.

As I considered this question again, at this point in my life when I am grappling with the entire cosmos, I really think the answer is still good. I am still trying to be the best person, cosmic citizen, I can be. However, I would add one more reason, and that is evolution. I think going to Church is potentially evolutionary. Being with you here, grappling with these complex idea and beliefs, helps further evolution. This Church can be an evolutionary place as we live out the great steps in the evolutionary process described by Teilhard de Chardin: attraction, connection, complexity, and consciousness.

Why is this important? It is important because if we are all connected and interwoven with complexity in this great dynamic evolving consciousness, then if something happens to you it happens to me. We not only can, but *must* do no harm. If the other is beloved, how can we do harm? We can say those words as part of our spiritual belief but when science backs it up...wow, it's powerful.

Jesus taught two thousand years ago to see one creation, all persons, all beings as our brothers and sisters. We are just now getting around to fully understanding and appreciating what he meant when he said, "Greater things than these shall you do." With the help of science --- which even as lay people we can appreciate --- there is a real chance we will finally get it right.