

Christos Lecture
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University of Colorado, Boulder, campus ministry
Cosmic Faith in an Anthropocene Age
20' then Q&A

Twenty-five years ago I started studying Hebrew. I was fascinated, and eager to learn more. I walked into a coffee shop near home and noticed that someone had posted a sign on the door that said *SHUV*. ‘Wow,’ I thought, ‘they’re encouraging people to come back!’ Shuv is a Hebrew word that means *return*, as in “repent and return to the Lord.” It took me a couple more visits before I realized the sign was encouraging people to push hard on the heavy door.

I want to frame today’s conversation in a model of reflecting and returning that’s basic to most spiritual work and disciplines. Sometimes it goes by a fancy academic term, *praxis-reflection*, that really just means reflecting on what you’ve done, and then altering what you do in a way that’s more in line with where you want to be going, and then reflecting again on that. One hopes that it’s an ascending spiral, rather than a closed loop or going down the drain. It’s meant to be an ongoing way of living that leads us closer to the holy: do, reflect, do, reflect, do. Or perhaps more memorably, do, what? do, what? Like doo-wop it ought to in some way resemble jazz and rhythm and blues, for it is about variations on a theme, rhythm, and gettin’ beyond the blues.

The context for this conversation is the current state of the planet – and in this model, what we’ve done to produce this reality – and how our religious sensibilities might lead us to more holy practice and healing of the whole.

This blue marble of a planet looks increasingly sad and sick, and most of it is the result of what human beings have been up to for the last couple of hundred years. The scale of changes in atmospheric composition, and other pollutant loads in earth and sky and sea (and in their inhabitants) is changing the weather (short-term) and the climate (long-term), killing off vast numbers of species, and making it harder for many others to survive in the same habitat. The temperature rise started with the Industrial Revolution, and the rate has only increased. The quantity of garbage we produce and throw away is becoming a geologic reality, as is the volume of concrete we produce. The GHGs resulting from fuel combustion, from concrete and livestock production, and from all forms of waste, are driving the heating. Global human population is expanding unsustainably,¹ and rates of consumption will likely rise even faster. The growing collection of these anthropogenic changes is likely becoming irreversible – we can’t restore the polar ice caps or re-engineer precipitation patterns, and we can never replace the biological diversity of lost species and ecosystems. Pogo said it a long time ago, ‘we have met the enemy and they is us.’

¹ Even though it is at the same time declining, even below replacement levels, in many industrialized nations

Diagnosis is the beginning of reflection. In the spiritual realm, it's called telling the truth, or confession. Like the heavy door, sometimes it takes a shove to get started, but the goal is always about re-shaping our lives in ways that acknowledge that we are not the center of the world. Ultimately, reflection is meant to turn us back toward loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. That's Judeo-Christian language, but the ongoing search to decenter ourselves, to vacate the orbital axis or nuclear position, or demote the idol in the mirror is the point of almost every enduring religious tradition. That quest, along with ignorance about the consequences of our behavior, is the central human problem. The antidote is life-giving (loving) relationship with the cosmic system, its source, and all its members.

I spoke the other night about domination theology as a major driver in our current predicament, particularly in the West. Domination theology is a time-honored way of justifying our self-centeredness, and shoring up our self-importance. It's heretical to say that some kinds of human beings are more important than others, but that has never stopped some Christians from asserting their outsized importance. There is another theological strand in the West that subverts and transforms our addiction to first place – dominion theology. The two begin in the same Genesis creation story, in which God tells the first human beings to 'have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air...' Dominion

here is about responsibility in and for the household – and all its members. In non-western traditions, particularly many indigenous theologies, the root understanding of the human place is as part of a web of creation or life.

Reflection about relationships can help that decentering move, by changing both our actions or praxis and our underlying theology and self-justifying worldview. Much of the necessary spiritual work is about awareness, accompanied by gratitude. What makes our lives possible? Start with the air we breathe. Where does it come from? How is our breathing sustained? How do we use this gift of oxygen? When we can gratefully recognize the algae in the sea and the trees and grasses that take our expired CO₂ and return oxygen to the vast pool we call earth's atmosphere, perhaps we can give thanks and be careful – full of care – in our relationships. When we begin to realize that breathing is an innate and largely unconscious gift of how our bodies are made, perhaps we can begin to care for them more consciously and gratefully. Care has its roots in lament and grieving – when we hear the cries, we can begin to care.

What have we been hearing about the situation in the wake of hurricanes in Texas, Florida, and the Caribbean, and now the fires in California? Over hours, days, and weeks, almost all news has included neighbor helping neighbor, even though most of them have been utter strangers. People brought boats from miles away to search and deliver the stranded to shelters. Americans are sending funds

to relieve the distress of people they will never meet. We have heard almost nothing about violence, which says volumes about the reflection that took place on the community level after Katrina – our collective action and response have changed in the face of disaster. Other disasters, like Ferguson, and Chicago, and Charlottesville, have helped many to reflect and begin to act in new ways. It's not perfect, but it is becoming a more life-giving way.

The Anthropocene disaster destroying our planetary nursery cannot be completely stopped or reversed, but its future can be altered. We can turn in more care-full and life-giving directions. Recognizing that we're all in this together, and that we will all pretty much live or die together, just might prompt a more generous response. That's the root of the first part of my title: *A Cosmic Faith*. The sooner and more effectively we begin to believe ourselves members of a cosmic web of life, the sooner and more effectively the future will open.

Many Christians have begun to speak of the Cosmic Christ, in a theological reflection on the tradition that speaks of God's effective word in creation. Consider the first Genesis creation story, where God says, "let there be light" and it appears, or "let the waters be separated from the waters," and it happens. Isaiah echoes that understanding: "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and

succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”² John’s gospel is the most explicit New Testament version, naming Jesus the Word of God enfleshed, the Word that pre-existed creation and will endure beyond its end.³ The cosmic Christ is everywhere evident in life-giving, loving, and liberating processes and actions in creation, both human and not. This theological understanding also seeks to decenter humanity from an over-privileged and idolatrous place in the web of all life. The planetary system and the cosmos will continue when the last *Homo sapiens* is dead and gone. Yet we live in hope that God’s ongoing creativity will bring something new out of their (our) ashes. That ongoing hope is the central expression of the Cosmic Christ – that resurrection is the double helix of the universe, part of the nature of its creation, and that the loving and life-giving nature of God is expressed in every varied aspect of the cosmos. Not only do human beings bear the image of God; all creation does.

What kinds of reflection on relationship might change our praxis? What about this example?

“Listen, God love everything you love – and a mess of stuff you don’t. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

² Isaiah 55:11 *NRSV*

³ John 1:1-5

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

What it do when it pissed off? I ast.

Oh, it make something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.”⁴

Celie and Shug, in *The Color Purple*.

Science has something to say about relationship, too. Einstein called it “spooky action at a distance,”⁵ and today cosmologists and quantum physicists talk about entanglement. One coupled particle instantaneously responds to alteration in the other member. The observer changes a system simply by looking (God saw what God had made, and it was good⁶). The Lakota term is *Mitakuye oyasin*, all my relations, all our relatives, a prayer that brings to mind all creatures and aspects

⁴ Shug and Celie in *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker. NY, Simon & Schuster: 1982 73:52-54

⁵ A brief explanation: <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/427174/einsteins-spooky-action-at-a-distance-paradox-older-than-thought/>

⁶ Genesis 1:4 a; 10b; 23b *et seq.*

of the natural world. Francis of Assisi's prayer does the same, in thanks and praise for brother sun, sister moon and stars, brothers wind and air, sister water, brother fire, sister mother earth, and sister death.

Acknowledging our interrelatedness begins to evoke transformation.

The practice that evokes transformative reflection can start almost anywhere. Sit down and rest; or slow down and pay attention. What do you notice? Can you be grateful? Even for a mosquito? Maybe it starts with gratitude for the people who discovered mosquito repellent and ammonia pens to relieve the itch.

Have you been in a garden or a forest lately and really looked at what's growing there? What do you see in the wide-open skies of the West – in full sun, at dusk, or on a starry night or a snowy noon? Can you discern the variety of rains and virga the Navajo have umpteen different names for? Have you spent time in the desert, looking for the subtle signs of life? What do fierce landscapes and wilderness evoke in you? Can you see and bless the diverse throng in your daily commute? Are you listening to the cries for help in Puerto Rico and Santa Rosa – and even more in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, where more than 16 million were affected by gargantuan floods in August?

Give thanks for what you discern and discover, and see how your care of creation changes. Small shifts of attention can make a massive difference. That's the basis of chaos theory, and it is also the spiritual basis of attention and reflection

and the changed practice that ensues. Imagine the consequences of Dostoevsky's charge: "Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love."⁷

There are some guideposts in this kind of reflection: look for beauty (especially in what is often judged ugly), respond with gratitude, be humble and open in relationship, and your hope will be rewarded. It applies to all sorts of situations and relationships – how we respond to crisis, conflict, the unexpected, or an enemy, as well as to the familiar, for there is far more than we can ever know.

Discernment is close kin to diagnosis, and diagnosis expects a response or a prescription. The healer of the universe would have us take these attitudes liberally and intentionally: awe in the face of beauty; gratitude; humility; and hope. Daily remember that observation changes the world we see and encounter. Apply equally to water use, food and drink, shopping, travel, and all forms of consumption. Spread liberally throughout fraught relationships; particularly in the public square, for politics is the art of living in community, and it CAN be beautiful when employed for the health of all. Cultivate a prophet's heart; speak out for cosmic

⁷ *The Brothers Karamazov*. Fyodor Dostoevsky. Ch 41. http://www.online-literature.com/dostoevsky/brothers_karamazov/41/ accessed 31Aug17

liveliness and flourishing, act with sheer holy boldness to heal the whole. Rather than resist the naysayers, receive them with love and you just might be surprised, for you have changed the expected trajectory! Live with the enduring hope that all will turn outward toward the wonder of conceiving a healed and abundantly life-giving cosmos, created for all.

Reflect, revise, and repeat – at least daily!