

# Process theology teaches us that we are all connected

HITS: 229

JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS



By Sister Mary Garascia

Once when I was in middle school, I came upon my chemistry professor father sitting quietly alone with a book in his lap. To my “what’cha doin’ Dad,” he said something like, “I’m thinking about Teilhard de Chardin, and rereading a bit of his book. He was a Jesuit priest paleontologist. They just announced on the news that he died today, and it’s so wonderful that he died on Easter Sunday.” Of course the conversation went on as long as my kid attention span could tolerate, because I did not know what a paleontologist was, or what “milieu” meant, or much more about evolution than just the word.

And why it was special that he died on that Easter, April 10, 1955? It was special because, my Dad explained in simple language, Teilhard saw Christ’s resurrection happening always and in everything, in the past, the present and the future. So Easter would have been his favorite Feast Day.

Poor Teilhard. When he was writing, Galileo was still condemned and evolution highly suspect by our Catholic Church. Our Church banned this world-renowned paleontologist from teaching his evolution-based theology and required all published copies of his books to be withdrawn. My dad had picked up his copy before the ban. Teilhard’s influence continues today. The American Teilhard Association has an interesting Zoom, scheduled in May, by two Jesuit astronomers working at the Vatican Observatory. What a change.

Currently, theologians and spiritual writers of creation or process theology continue trying to integrate science and faith, like Teilhard did. This is important. Long ago Catholicism embraced the dictum (cf St. Thomas Aquinas, d. 1274) that Truth is one, and so truths ought not contradict. But today some Catholics, even young as junior high students, leave our religion because the science they learn seems to contradict our beliefs.

Less technical Catholic writers include Matthew Fox (former Catholic, now Episcopalian), Richard Rohr, Diarmund O’Murchu, Elizabeth A. Johnson. Others are more challenging, like Iliia Delio and John Haugh. Most have YouTube talks to check out. Sometimes they too get in trouble with the Church. For example, they find unacceptable the traditional understanding of original sin and its consequent “satisfaction theory” (that an infinite God required the infinite recompense of Jesus’ death to return us to grace lost in an original paradise). When they speak of Christ, however, their theology is more orthodox. They draw from early Church theologians of Rome and Constantinople. They draw from Scripture (Eph 1:10; Col 1:15; Rom 8:19; Heb 1:3; Rev 1:8). And central to their theology is the role of the Risen Christ (or the Cosmic or Universal Christ) and the action of the Spirit.

What do these writers say that is different from other kinds of theologians? First, they tend to ask why the universe is the way it is, and not why there is a universe. If we say God is creator, then God always has a creation. Our universe emerged from “something” (not from nothing), science tells us, that incredibly hot, dense something which flared forth in the big bang.

For these authors, God is absolutely necessary to understand certain features of the universe. Science reveals that the universe is both regular (it has forces and laws) and diverse (many different things emerging and evolving). It has directionality — it’s heading toward ever more complexity. From this complexity emerges thought and subjectivity — beings who are conscious of what is happening to them and able to think about their experiences. Science can describe and study these features but it cannot account for why these features are there, these theologians say.

I think we must add another unexplained feature of the universe. While there is territorial aggression and food chain violence in other forms of life, malicious violence, cruelty and greed emerges with

homo sapiens. Process theology (founder Alfred North Whitehead, d. 1947) speaks of a free God with a free creation, so free that it may even produce malicious evil. However process theologians also see God as taking in and responding to everything that happens in creation. When the image of God in us was being overcome by the accumulated effects of human evil (Rohr, citing Athanasius, d. 373), God’s response was Jesus.

Bear with me, readers, we’re getting there! For these writers, the first incarnation of God is the divine, embedded in all that has been, is, and will be, and moving things along. “...the Creator Spirit enables ongoing creation from within ... by endowing the universe with the capacity to transcend itself toward ever new forms (Elizabeth Johnson).” When the universe evolved thought and consciousness in homo sapiens, it is as though the universe itself began awakening, becoming conscious of itself (John Haught). The universe and we are so bound together, both shot through with Divinity (theosis), that when we humans desecrate the universe, we diminish ourselves. Conversely, when we become malicious, we diminish the universe.

The second incarnation is Jesus. Jesus is an intensification of divine indwelling in the world, a specifying of the pattern and aim (Logos) for human life. Jesus shows us what humanity may become, what it can grow to be. He is the illuminator, revealer, light, the “Word” of John’s Gospel prologue. By the end of the first five Centuries of Christianity, these ideas were in use to speak of the second person of the Trinity, the Christ. Whitehead suggested that God was changed when divinity had its human experience in Jesus: God becomes “the fellow sufferer who understands.”

Jesus of Nazareth died because entropy (decay, death) is the universe’s process. Dying is the way the whole universe grows into its intended beauty. Process theology imagines God gathering up the value of each completed “life” — of subatomic particles, us, stars — into God’s self, and offering that value back as potential to everything in the next instant of time. In resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth’s “new possibility” was to stay poured out in human history and culture and memory as Christ Jesus. This continuing incarnation is also a continuing revelation — of the divine and human union which is Jesus as risen Christ, a union which we also experience, in our subjectivity, our inner lives “in Christ.”

Sounds “heady?” It is, but this still developing theology has a powerful insight to offer our faith lives. Have you ever wondered whether your life and what you are doing with it really matters? This theology says it matters to the whole universe, not just to our small individual selves. Here’s Teilhard: “It is through the collaboration which he solicits from us that Christ, starting from all creatures, is consummated and attains his plenitude. St. Paul himself tells us so. We may, perhaps, imagine that Creation was finished long ago. But that would be quite wrong ... Our role is to help complete it, if only by the humble work of our hands. This is the real meaning and the price of our acts.”

No matter how insignificant our ordinary lives seem to ourselves from time to time, we are essential to God because we are conscious and freely committed contributors to the mystery of all being, contributors to the future becoming that God and we and the universe are all about.

With apologies to these theologians for this inadequate and idiosyncratic account, I wish you all a happy Easter!

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