

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2015
A Model for Journey Theology: Care for the Environment

I've been puzzling for months over how to write an essay answering the question (raised in this most recent series of essays) about the doctrinal box the Church is in, and how this two thousand year old institution can gracefully move beyond this box. The content of such an essay was briefly outlined at the end of a prior essay¹.

I'm still not quite there. But I responded to an article in *America Magazine* on "[Relational Ecology](#)" by [Brad Rothrock](#). As I read again what I wrote, I see that it has some relevance to the topic of doctrinal boxes, and also to the recent encyclical *Laudato si'* on care for the environment, so I share a slightly edited version here:

Dear Mr. Rothrock,

This is a very thoughtful and provocative article. Two thoughts.

Toward the end of the article you speak about going from experience to judgment, and I wonder whether the two examples you give might miss a third. We may decide, "yes, this understanding is true." Or we may decide, "no, some other explanation is needed." My experience is that these follow one another over time. At one point in time we say, "yes, this understanding is true." Then, some time later, as experience accumulates, we say, with respect to the very same understanding, "no, some other explanation is needed." And then, some time later still, another understanding, perhaps having some relation to the earlier understanding, merits the further decision, "yes, this understanding is true."

Human reason -- a concern of Aquinas -- can proceed in this fashion, but it raises a question about the temporal relativity of truth. Science is full of examples of progressive understandings where there is an element of truth at each stage, but where the truth relied upon did not turn out to be true. Aristotle had a vision of the cosmos with the earth at its center, an argument supported by evidence². Copernicus and Galileo found a way to look at the planetary evidence in way that simplified calculations by using the sun as the center.

A forward to *De Revolutionibus* (written by Osiander not Copernicus) suggested that the sun centered view was simply a convenience for calculation, whereas Galileo insisted on the truth of the matter: the earth actually did revolve around the sun. This famously earned Galileo house arrest

for the remainder of his days because, by that time, the people of God had become invested in the truth of an earth centered view of God's attention.

Several decades later Isaac Newton put the matter to rest with his laws of motion, holding to religiously congenial notions that space and time were absolute. So powerful was Newton's understanding that a new planet, Neptune, was predicted and then discovered at the place predicted. Several centuries later even Newton's understanding did not prove adequate for the cosmos.

Einstein responded creatively with an understanding that better explained the evidence, but did so by rejecting the absoluteness of space and time. In Einstein's world the cosmos had neither a center nor edges. On the other hand, his understanding has one of the most simple and elegant premises in all of science: the laws of physics are the same throughout the cosmos.

Religion seems pulled hither and yon by piggybacking on this or that aspect of the reigning theories of physics: the earth was the center, but then it wasn't; space and time were absolute, until they weren't. This succession of understandings, each of which can be used in one way or another to affirm the grandeur of God, has no particular rhyme or reason in religion. The truth seems more elusive. Faith seeking understanding is always now and not yet.

It is worth noting that from the point of view of physics this progression is coherent. Each step in the progression continuing to serve credibly within the observational limitations of its evidence. Newton's understanding, for example, continues to be used in engineering because the accuracy is "good enough" and the mathematics are much simpler than Einstein's.

For religion, by contrast, the role of changes in physics has been disruptive. The progression from Aristotle to Galileo to Newton to Einstein has steadily undermined the initial notion that the Earth was a physically important aspect of creation. It is no accident that Einstein's moniker of "relativity" was greeted from the perspective of religion by concerns about "relativism".

Which leads to a second thought. Has religion no understanding of its own, appropriate to the fullness of reality? Perhaps the best we can do is, to use your quote from Charles Taylor, the "best available account." It would be a different kind of

understanding, as we proceed from one "best available account" to another. And if there is integrity in the progression, who is to say that one community's journey is more central to the life of God than another? We are, perhaps, in need of another "best available account" that makes comprehensible and understandable, and ultimately coherent, the observed diversity of religious understandings.

Perhaps we are closer than we suppose to such an understanding. The very notion that at any one time there is a "best available account" is itself an understanding as different from a revelatory view of truth as Einstein's cosmos is from Aristotle's. It is a straightforward transformation, suggested by the inadequacy in physics of an absolute time and an absolute space, to suppose the overall coherence of radically different progressions of "best available accounts" among religions over different times and places. Dialogue among religions, and among individuals and communities of this or that religious persuasion or no religious persuasion at all, would certainly be more lively with the benefit of such an understanding.

I should add one further thought. You speak movingly about the unity of creation, and the challenge that such unity should be to our debilitating anthropocentrism that lays waste to the environment. Pope Francis speaks to this in *Laudato Si'*.

But at the same time you accept the essential separateness of God, as Creator, as taught by Aquinas. Yes, all creation bears the dignity of God's image. Is this enough, however, in the face of an essential separateness?

My reason for asking is the suspicion that we conceive "separateness" with too much simplicity. It is the simplicity of Aristotle's cosmos, where the visible "heavens" are the playground of the gods, writ large to account for a cosmos much more expansive than Aristotle could have imagined. We imagine a God, in His Heaven, literally outside of creation.

It is now clear that we were mistaken on the centrality of the earth and, indeed, on the notion of centrality itself. Is it possible that our distinction between heaven and earth is comparably flawed? Yes, we are on a journey toward union with a loving God, but if reality is one perhaps that journey has greater continuity than is implied by the separateness of God and the distinction between heaven and earth.

If God is separate as well as 'other', that means that the dominant relational link is one of separation, with our link to the rest of creation being both different and subordinate. If that is our understanding of God, then the subordination of creation is inevitable.

To accord creation its proper dignity we need a different understanding of God. And in the Trinity we have sufficient hints, if only we can overcome our religious prejudice in favor of our ancestors' "best available account," which is so ancient that it has been made sacred beyond inquiry. Christ is God Incarnate; each of us is blessed with the Spirit within us. It is the same Spirit, a source of unity for all reality.

Care for the environment resonates with us. Is it not the Spirit within us that grounds that resonance? This resonance has been growing since at least St. Francis. The pope's choice of name is significant.

Perhaps the shoe is on the other foot. As often happens, the Spirit is there before us. We are laggards at heart. It is not that we need to overcome the separateness of God in order to care for the environment. Rather, the fact that care for the environment resonates with us already shows us that God is not separate.

Thus, death is not a separation from creation in order that we can be with God. Something more marvelous is in God's mind. Care for creation is part of our own salvation. Indeed, care for creation is not only part of our own salvation -- if we adhere to the classic notion of what that means -- but integral to the fullness of our living, a living which does not end at death.³

Thanks, again, for a very good and provocative article.

¹ "The New Evangelization: An Easter People Come of Age -- Part 3"

² Aristotle, "On the Heavens", Book II, #14.

³ This last paragraph I added after submitting comments on-line to *America*. This the way it is with articles, tweaking till the very end.