

Deep Incarnation: Prepare To Be Astonished

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Introduction

Consider two images of the natural world. One is the by-now familiar photo of our planet taken from space: a blue marble swirled around with white clouds against a vista of endless black. Astronauts who have seen this view with their own eyes speak of its power to change their attitude. Saudi Arabian astronaut Sultan bin Salman al-Saud, part of an international crew, recollected: “The first day we all pointed to our own countries. The third day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day, we were all aware of only one earth.” One astronaut blocked out the earth with his thumb, the way we can block out the moon; thinking that everyone and everything he loved was on that little dot, he realized what a precious place it really is.

The second image appeared in a New York newspaper in an article by the Brazilian writer Edgard Telles Ribeiro. Early one fine summer morning, he set his umbrella and chair on the beach in Rio de Janeiro, intending to read before the crowds arrived. “But then I spotted a small shape emerging from the water. As it landed, I noticed it was flapping its wings feebly. Everything about the little fellow, its slowness, weakness, and vulnerability, told me it was not there by choice. A penguin? On Ipanema Beach?” Yes! “The penguin fell to its side. It had swum 2,000 miles, its normal pursuit of anchovies possibly confused by shifting ocean currents and temperatures. It would not survive on the hot sand.” Joggers gathered, the firemen were called, and the animal removed. Relieved, the author was nevertheless discomforted with the sense that something troubling had happened. Later he learned that in recent years over a thousand Magellanic penguins have appeared on Brazil’s coasts, exhausted and starving; most soon die. Scientists attribute their disorientation to disruptions caused by climate change. The author reflects, “That frail, helpless, displaced being had made me suddenly understand our impact on the planet.”

Today ecological awareness is growing among people everywhere, ‘ecological’ from the Greek *oikos*, meaning household or home. Earth is our home in the universe. Only one earth, and we are dazzled by its beauty. At the same time, only one earth, and we humans are wrecking its life-supporting systems of soil, water, and air, and ruining the life-patterns of other species. What has this got to do with religious people committed to walking by the light of their faith? All the world’s great religious traditions place value on the natural world and teach an ethic of self-restraint and compassion for others. Here we will focus on Christian faith in the light of these two images, the beautiful planet and the distressed penguin.

To date, most of this reflection has rightly centered around the doctrine of creation. Writings by recent Popes, by the Catholic Bishops of Guatemala, the Philippines, United States, northern Italy, Australia, and elsewhere, and by a growing number of theologians underscore the belief that since God created the world freely out of love and pronounced it good, it is intrinsically valuable in its own right. Hence, it is worthy of our respect and care. Christian faith, of course, encompasses more than belief in the one God, Maker of heaven and earth. As the structure of the creed reveals, faith pivots around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, cherished as Emmanuel, God with us, and also affirms the Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of life. In these lectures we will explore first christology (doctrine of Christ) and then pneumatology (doctrine of the Spirit), probing their fruitful potential for ecological spirituality and ethics. We start with Jesus Christ.

Ministry: The Christic Paradigm

We begin with the gospel portraits of Jesus' brief ministry as an adult. One of the powerful results of modern biblical scholarship is the rediscovery of the importance of this ministry for Christian discipleship. We see him now as a Spirit-filled Jewish prophet, a teacher and healer in first-century Galilee, crucified for historically political reasons and proclaimed to be raised from the dead as Messiah and Lord in categories of Jewish expectation of the end time. By giving us clues that Jesus of Nazareth was one kind of person and not another, taught specific things about the compassion of God and not something else, engaged in a prophetic ministry and not another, called people to one kind of response and not another, Jesus research is providing new imaginative fodder for Christian life and practice in every dimension.

A key insight uncovered by this work is the centrality of reign/kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus. The reign of God is a rich Jewish symbol that points to God's coming rule, when the divine will is done on earth as it is in heaven. And what is that will? Nothing less than the reconciling and flourishing of all creatures, which we call salvation. For someone subsequently interpreted mainly as a spiritual Savior, it is remarkable how Jesus' view of the reign of God included earthy well-being. Not only is sin forgiven. But physical health is restored. Recall how his healing practices placed people's bodily suffering at the center of concern, and how he used his own warm touch and even spittle to convey health. And recall how he fed people! Large numbers on hillsides and smaller groups in homes where he was copious host and table companion knew his concern for their bodily hunger. His preaching showed a similar earthy orientation. Set within an agrarian culture, his parables are salted with reference to seeds and harvests, rain and sunsets, sheep and nesting birds. In his view, God cared for the wildflowers, and was even concerned for a dead sparrow fallen to the ground (Matt 10:29) - dare we think a washed up penguin? As the ministry of Jesus revealed, the love of the God of heaven and earth embraces the whole creation.

From the gospels' depiction of Jesus's words, deeds, and relationships, scholars draw out the idea of the "christic paradigm." This is a summary motif that illuminates the gospels in all their complexity. A major christic paradigm operative in theology today states that as far as the living God is concerned, "liberating, healing, and inclusive love is the meaning of it all." This is what Jesus stands for. Clearly this paradigm applies to everyone who suffers from the frustrations and finitude of mortal life. In a special way it applies to marginalized human beings, suffering from entrenched poverty and violence, for whom God intends liberation and healing. But theology cannot stop there. *Write this christic paradigm, drawn from gospel mercy, across the whole earth.* Then it becomes clear that plenitude of life for all, not just for one species (*homo sapiens*) but for all, including poor human beings and all living creatures, is God's original and ultimate intent. The christic paradigm makes clear that the earth and all its creatures are also encompassed by divine love. In this perspective, Jesus' great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself gets extended to include all members of the community of life. Repeating the question of the lawyer who challenged Jesus, Brian Patrick asks, "Who is my neighbor?" His answer: "The Samaritan? The outcast? The enemy? Yes, yes, of course. But it is also the whale, the bird, and the rain forest. Our neighbor is the entire community of life. We must love it all as our very self."

Love as Jesus enfolded it is the meaning encoded at the heart of the universe itself. His ministry underscores the dignity of what is physical, for bodies matter to God: all bodies, not only those beautiful and full of life but also those damaged, violated, starving, dying, bodies of humankind and otherkind alike. Hence Jesus' ministry grounds compassion for all the bodies in creation, not only those that succeed in their time but also those that are disparaged, judged unimportant or unacceptable, broken, pushed into extinction.

With this conviction, Christians disciples can risk the struggle for life in the world where socially, death due to the ravages of poverty is a daily possibility for millions of people, and ecologically, death due to rapacious greed and insensitivity affects millions of other creatures. In doing so disciples are following Christ by working in history to enfold the reign of God, thereby moving evolution in the direction passionately willed by God. Along this line of thinking, the implications of the christic paradigm bring social justice and ecological integrity into a tight embrace.

Christmas, or Deep Incarnation

But that is not all we have to say. For central to Christian faith is the experience that in dealing with our brother Jesus of Nazareth, we are dealing at the same time with a person who embodies the God who is Love in the flesh. Before the end of the first century this belief found its most influential expression in the Prologue of John's gospel. Adapting an older Jewish hymn to Holy Wisdom, the evangelist wrote: "and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full

of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). The original Greek of the gospel does not speak of the Word becoming human (*anthropos*), but flesh (*sarx*), a broader reality. Here the flesh is not identified with sinfulness and contrasted with a spiritual mode of being, as in the older flesh-spirit (*sarx-pneuma*) christology of Paul. Rather, *sarx* in John signifies what is material, perishable, simply and poignantly transient, in a word, finite, the very opposite of what is divine. All emphasis in the Prologue is on the entry of the Word of God into the vulnerable realm of earthy existence. In its historical context, this hymn has an unmistakable anti-gnostic tone. It protests against the idea that in Christ God just made an appearance while remaining untouched by the so-called contamination of matter. It rejects the idea that Jesus' humanity was just a disguise, a masquerade in borrowed plumes, a suit of clothes put on to do a certain job but discarded at the end. Rather, taking the ancient theme of God's dwelling among the people of Israel a step further, it affirms that in a new and saving event the Word became flesh, joined forever with the sphere of the material and mortal to shed light on all from within.

In truth, the type of *sarx* that the Word became was precisely human, which may explain the strong emphasis on salvation for human beings in most christological reflection throughout the ages. In our day, however, the human race itself is being repositioned as an intrinsic part of the evolutionary network of life on our planet, which in turn is a part of the solar system, which came into being as a later chapter of cosmic history. Tracing this natural history opens a way to broader insight into the meaning of the *sarx* that the Word became.

The prevailing theory in science today is that everything we know exists comes from a single indecipherable instant. Dated at 13.7 billion years ago, the universe began when a single numinous speck exploded in what is rather inelegantly called the Big Bang, an outpouring of matter and energy still going on. This material expanded according to a precisely calibrated rate, unfurling neither too fast nor too slow. Its lumpy unevenness allowed swirling galaxies to form as gravity pulled particles together and their dense friction ignited the stars. Roughly five billion years ago, some of those giant, aging stars died in great supernova explosions that cooked simpler hydrogen atoms into heavier metals such as carbon and iron, spewing this debris into the cosmos. Following the original pattern of explosion and attraction, some of this cloud of dust and gas reformed and reignited to become our sun, a second generation star. Some of it coalesced into chunks too small to catch fire, forming the planets of our solar system including Earth. Three and a half billion years ago, another momentous change took place when the material of this planet so arranged itself that it burst into self-replicating creatures: the advent of life.

Out of the Big Bang the stars; out of the stardust the Earth; out of the molecules of the Earth, life. They were single-celled creatures at first, for millions of years. Then out of their life and death an advancing tide, fragile but unstoppable: creatures that live in shells, fish,

amphibians, insects, flowers, birds, reptiles, and mammals, among whom recently emerged human beings, we primates whose brains are so richly textured that we experience self-reflective consciousness and freedom, or in classical terms, mind and will. Matter, zesty with self-transcendence, evolves to life, then to consciousness (animals), then to spirit (self-reflective consciousness in humans). Human thought and love, we realize, are not something injected into the universe from without, but are the flowering in us of deeply cosmic energies. In the human species, nature becomes conscious of itself and open to fulfillment in grace and glory. As rabbi Abraham Heschel notes, this makes human beings the cantors of the universe, able to sing praise and thanks in the name of all the rest. In our inspirited corporeality, in turn, human beings are an intrinsic element of the cosmos, taken from the ground (Gen 2:7), never to be isolated from it. Clearly, what is now no longer adequate is a traditional dualistic philosophy that defines spirit and matter as separate and opposed elements; or a spiritual platonism that looks upon matter as dark, chaotic, and anti-divine; or a materialism that reduces all consciousness to its physical sub-stratum. Only a philosophy that envisions matter and spirit as one in their origin, history, and goal can support a credible view of human beings in light of evolutionary theory.

As this story of the universe makes clear, everything is connected with everything else; nothing conceivable is isolated. What makes our blood red? Iron. Where does it come from? Scientist and theologian Arthur Peacocke explains, "Every atom of iron in our blood would not be there had it not been produced in some galactic explosion billions of years ago and eventually condensed to form the iron in the crust of the earth from which we have emerged." Quite literally, human beings are made of stardust. Furthermore, the story of life's evolution makes evident that we share with all other living creatures on our planet a common genetic ancestry. Bacteria, pine trees, blueberries, horses, the great gray whales - we are all genetic kin in the great community of life.

We evolved relationally; we exist symbiotically; our existence depends on interaction with the rest of the natural world. Repositioning the human species with regard to our relationship to planetary and cosmic matter has far-reaching implications for an ecological view of Christ. From this perspective, the flesh that the Word became is part of the vast body of the cosmos. The phrase "deep incarnation," coined by Danish scholar Niels Gregersen, is starting to be used in theology to signify this radical divine reach into the very tissue of biological existence. Born of a woman and the Hebrew gene pool, Jesus of Nazareth was a creature of earth, a complex unit of minerals and fluids, an item in the carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen cycles, a moment in the biological evolution of this planet. Like all human beings, he carried within himself the signature of the supernovas and the geology and life history of the Earth. The atoms comprising his body once belonged to other creatures. The genetic structure of his cells made him part of the whole community of life that descended from common ancestors in the ancient

seas. The *sarx* of John 1:14 thus reaches beyond Jesus and beyond all other human beings to encompass the whole biological world of living creatures and the cosmic dust of which we are composed.

The German theologian Karl Rahner said pointedly: *One of the most radical statements that Christianity dares to make is that God became material.* “Deep” interpretation understands John 1:14 to be saying just that. This incarnation, a concentrated expression of divine love already poured out in creation, has effects in two directions. First, it links the transcendent God forever with the flesh of the cosmos. By becoming flesh, the Word acquires personal time, a life story, a death, and does so as a participant in the history of the world. Matter itself now becomes a permanent reality of the Word of God, who never shucks off this connection. Second, this relationship confers blessing on the whole of earthly reality in its corporal dimensions, and on the cosmos in which the earth dynamically exists. Teilhard de Chardin expresses this insight in his beautifully lyrical *Hymn to Matter*. Harsh, perilous, mighty, impenetrable, and mortal though this material stuff be: “I acclaim you as the divine *milieu*, charged with creative power, as the ocean stirred by the Spirit, as the clay molded and infused with life by the incarnate Word.” Rather than being a barrier that distances us from the divine, the matter of this world can function as a mediation to the immediacy of God. Hence it is by carrying out our creative responsibilities in and through and to the world, not by fleeing it, that we set out on the road to redemption. This roots ecological ethics in the deepest core of Christian faith.

Easter: Deep Cross and Resurrection

The end of Jesus’ life in death and resurrection provides yet another chapter in the astonishing narrative of God’s immersion in matter. No exception to perhaps the only ironclad rule in all of nature, Jesus died, his life bleeding out in a spasm of state violence. Theology has always seen in the cross the love of God writ large: the Son of God entered into suffering “for us.” Contemporary theology is replete with the idea that in Christ God suffered not just once on a certain Good Friday, but suffers continuously through history, in solidarity with the ongoing agony of the human race. Crosses keep on being set up in history. *Ecce homo*: behold the human being, with tear-stained, starving, tormented faces. The crucified God suffers with human beings, and will continue to do so until we take all the crucified peoples down from the cross. Nor is this solidarity limited to human beings alone. Nature, too, suffers: “the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now” (Rom 8:22). In a cosmic framework, the christic paradigm discloses that the Holy Mystery of Love bears the cost of new life through the endless millennia of suffering and dying entailed by evolution.

For Christian faith, the cross does not have the last word. It blossoms as the tree of life: “He is risen, Alleluia.” Starting with a humiliated body laid in a tomb, the resurrection tells of

the creative power of divine love triumphing over the crucifying power of evil and the burying power of death. Thanks to its original context in Jewish eschatological expectation, this Easter news has always involved bodiliness as an essential element. Far from the Greek dualism that envisioned the human being composed of separable body and soul, Hebrew anthropology knew only of the body-person, dust of the earth and breath of God in unbreakable unity. The full-bodied reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the necessary correlate. It is not his soul alone that is saved from death, but his whole body-person-self. As Rahner observes, in the incarnation, the divine Logos became flesh, and in the consummation of his finite reality he does not strip off this materiality but retains it eternally. The resurrection of the *body*, as we confess in the creed, is essential to this central Christian belief.

What this means in the concrete is not seriously imaginable to us who still live within the space-time grid of our known universe. It certainly does not mean that Jesus' corpse was resuscitated to resume life in our present state of biological existence, along the lines of the Lazarus story. Such a naive physical view, presented in stained glass windows and Easter sermons, pervades popular thinking, but it does not bear up under critical scrutiny. Yet the resurrection does have much to do with bodiliness. The empty tomb stands as an historical marker for the love of God, stronger than death, which embraces biological existence itself and rescues it from annihilation. Theology tends to use the language of transformation of this event but, as Anthony Kelly observes, "the problem with transformation is that we cannot imagine what it means before it happens." To use Paul's images from 1 Corinthians, as a seed is unrecognizable in the mature plant into which it sprouts; as what is perishable turns into something imperishable; as a creature of dust comes to bear the image of heaven, so too transformation beyond death entails unimaginable change. The angel, a streak of lightening in the tomb, says simply: "he has been raised" (Matt 28:6).

For Jesus personally, this means the abiding, redeemed validity of his human historical existence, drawn to life in God's presence forever. The joy that breaks out at Easter comes from the added realization that his destiny is not meant for himself alone but for the whole human race. It signals that a blessed future awaits all who go through the shattering of death, which is everyone. The poetry of an early Christian hymn captures this succinctly when it calls the risen Christ the "firstborn of the dead" (Col 1:18). Paul gives us another terrific metaphor when he refers to Christ as "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20). If you have ever grown tomatoes, you know the joy of picking the first ripe one. But there are more on the vine, and their day of harvest will come. Christ, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, the first tomato! Death, then, does not mean annihilation. Neither does salvation mean the escape of the human spirit from a relational existence embedded in matter. Rather, the risen Christ awakens hope for transformation of our whole body-person-self, dust and breath together, into the glory of God.

“Deep resurrection” pushes beyond its human scope to include also a future for the whole natural world. “In Christ’s resurrection the earth itself arose,” declared Ambrose of Milan. The reasoning runs like this. If this human being, Jesus of Nazareth, composed of star stuff and earth stuff, whose life was a genuine part of the historical and biological community of Earth, whose body existed in a network of relationships extending to the whole physical universe, if such “a piece of this world, real to the core” at death surrendered his life in love to the living God and is now forever with God in glory, this signals in advance the redemption not just of other human beings but of the whole creation. The whole natural world, all of matter in its endless permutations, will not be left behind but will be likewise be transfigured by the resurrecting action of the Creator Spirit. As the words of that same early hymn put it, Christ is “the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15).

In a beautiful synergy of visual and verbal poetry, the liturgy of the Easter vigil celebrates this with cosmic symbols of light and dark, new fire, flowers and greens, water and oil, bread and wine. The *Exsultet*, sung once a year on this night, shouts: “Exult, all creation, around God’s throne,” for Jesus Christ is risen! It continues: “Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendor, radiant in the brightness of your King! Christ has conquered! Glory fills you! Darkness vanishes forever!” The risen Christ prefigures the ultimate hope of all creation.

Once when the noted 19th century U.S. naturalist John Muir came across a dead bear in Yosemite Park, he wrote in his journal a biting criticism against religious folk who make no room in heaven for such noble creatures: “Not content with taking all of earth, they also claim the celestial country as the only ones who possess the kinds of souls for which that imponderable empire was planned.” To the contrary, he believed, God’s “charity is broad enough for bears.”

Not many in Muir’s day agreed. But taking the christic paradigm seriously, and writing it large across the natural world, discloses that the final chapter of history will be the salvation of everything, of matter, of bodily life, of all creatures, of the whole cosmos, into the embrace of God. Far from being rejected, the evolving world will be transfigured by the life-giving action of the Creator Spirit. As with the resurrection of Jesus and all the human dead, cosmic redemption is neither imaginable nor empirically verifiable. But it stems from the logic of faith in God who creates and indwells the world, embraces it in incarnation, dies into its depths, rises into new life, and loves the whole evolving shebang. In the light of the risen Christ, hope of salvation for sinful, mortal human beings expands to becomes a cosmic hope, a shared hope.

An Ethical Challenge

It becomes clear in our day that a moral universe limited to human persons is no longer adequate. Ethical reflection needs to widen attention beyond humanity alone and recenter vigorous moral consideration on the whole community of life. Pope John Paul II articulated a

stunning principle that supports such praxis: “respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation.” In other words, we owe love and justice not only to humankind but to “otherkind.” Converting minds and hearts to such an Earth ethic entails at least three challenges that will enable us to live as partners with God in continuing creation rather than as destroyers of the world.

~ The challenge of contemplation. Here we gaze on the Earth with eyes of love rather than with an arrogant, utilitarian stare. We will not save what we do not love, and this response begins by awakening our biophilic emotions. The scientist Louis Agassiz noted: “I spent the summer traveling; I got half-way across my back yard.” The wonders of our planet are a source of revelation. Anyone who has ever glimpsed the beauty of God through an experience of delight or awe in the natural world knows this. The contemplative response engages the natural world with religious imagination and heart, allowing it to lift our minds and hearts to God and enfolding it into our religious love.

~ The challenge of asceticism. Here we restrain our rampant consumerism and self-indulgence in order to protect the Earth. A sensuous, earth-affirming asceticism leads us to live more simply; observe the Sabbath as a genuine day of rest; fast from shopping; endure the inconvenience of running an ecologically-sensitive household; and conduct business with an eye to the green bottom line as well as the red or black. We do these things not to make ourselves suffer and not because we’re anti-body, but so that we can become alert to how enslaved we are by the marketplace and act to offset its effect on the planet.

~ The challenge of prophecy. Here we take critical action on behalf of the survival of the planet. The ongoing destruction of the Earth through human acts of ecocide, biocide, geocide is a deeply sinful desecration. In the tradition of biblical prophecy and the spirit of Jesus, we counter this destruction by acting for the care, protection, restoration, and healing of nature, even if this goes counter to powerful economic and political interests - and it does. If nature is the new poor, then our passion to establish justice for the poor and oppressed now must extend to include suffering human beings AND life systems and other species under threat. “Save the rain forest” becomes a concrete moral application of the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” The moral goal becomes ensuring vibrant life in community for all.

Conclusion

Faith in Jesus Christ can provide rich resources for an ecological ethic that is critically needed at this time of earth’s distress. In union with divine Love that is cosmocentric and biocentric, not merely anthropocentric, the Love that is glimpsed concretely in Jesus Christ’s incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection, Christian life now stands to be shaped by an ethic that includes ecological responsibility. To cite John’s gospel again, Jesus Christ is a gift given

because “God so loved the world” (Jn 3:15). In the original gospel Greek, the world used for world is kosmos: the whole beautiful, groaning, evolving cosmos. Our love and action on behalf of this beautiful planet and all its creatures, including that struggling penguin, will flow as a response.

In a well-known parable told by Teilhard de Chardin, the human race is on a ship moving through an unchartered sea. For millennia, people lived in the hold of the ship, unaware of the larger evolutionary processes moving the boat. Now the passengers have come above board. On the deck they see a tiller, navigational instruments, charts. They have crossed a threshold. To an important degree, human beings are now able to speculate on the direction of the evolutionary process, and even to drive the ship toward a conscious goal. Will they act responsibly and steer in a goodly direction? Or will they crash the ship onto the rocks? Christian faith in Christ has a great deal to contribute to a flourishing out