

Lecture 11. Christ and the Cosmos

Our penultimate lecture will focus on Christ and the cosmos. We will reflect upon the person and work of Christ within an evolutionary view of the world. We know that the cosmos is not the static stage that forms the backdrop for the drama of human history. Rather, the cosmos itself is a drama; the cosmos is a story, actually a cosmogenesis. Human history is part of the story of the cosmos. How, then, do we view Christ and his redeeming work within the context of the evolution of the cosmos?

I. Introductory Remarks: Exploring the mystery of Jesus Christ within an evolutionary view of the universe. Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (2015) is functionally a collaboration between science and theology. In it, he asserts that God created a world in need of development. "God in some way sought to limit himself in such a way that many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering, are in reality part of the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into the act of cooperation with the Creator." - Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), 80. This echoes Paul on the groaning of creation (Romans 8:18-25), *creatio continua*. "One Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross. From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy." - Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 99. "... Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light." - Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 221. Similarly, Thomas Berry asserts that we live not so much in a cosmos as in a cosmogenesis.

II. God's Action in Creation: Pope John Paul II, in his 1999 address to the Pontifical Academy of Science, said that evolution is more than an open question. The origins of the cosmos - more than thirteen billion years old - began with the rapid inflation of a tiny, hot density of energy (the "Big Bang"). This holds importance for later development of the physical constants and initial cosmic conditions: Our solar system is about 4.5 billion years old. Life appeared on earth about 3.5 billion years ago. Modern humans evolved between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago.

Thomas Aquinas makes a distinction here that is helpful when handling this topic. He points to the distinction between primary and secondary causality:

1. Primary Causality: God is the giver of *esse*, existence itself. Creatures have *esse* insofar as they participate in the fullness of God's *esse*. Primary causality is at the

level of the transcendent; yet God is also close to every creature, the ever-constant source of its existence: "Now since it is God's nature to exist, he it must be who properly causes existence in creatures, just as it is fire that itself sets other things on fire. And God is causing this effect in things not just when they begin to exist, but all the time they are maintained in existence, just as the sun is lighting up the atmosphere all the time the atmosphere remains lit. During the whole period of a thing's existence, therefore, God must be present to it, and present in a way keeping with the way in which the thing possesses its existence." Summa Theologiae 1,8,1.

2. Secondary Causality: Operates at the level of the network of inner worldly relations between creatures. God works through secondary causes. God "acts from the abundance of divine goodness imparting to creatures the dignity of causing." Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae 1,22,3. Referencing this, Elizabeth Johnson explains, "God makes the world by empowering it to make itself." Elizabeth Johnson, Quest for the Living God, 193.

Karl Rahner's work assumes an emergent universe - belief in creation is the transcendental experience of the origination of all being from absolute being. God is distinct from creation, but God establishes this distinction and in so doing keeps creation with God's Self in a unique way. Created, finite beings are subject to the constant "pressure" of divine being, which gives creatures the capacity for active self-transcendence - this makes possible an increase in being.

John Haught points out God's self-limitation in creating a world that develops. He understands God's wisdom and providence as, "an unbounded self-emptying graciousness that grants the world an open space and generous amount of time to become more, and in doing so gives it ample opportunity to participate in its own creative self-transformation." - John F. Haught, Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 65.

III. Christ in an Evolving Universe: The Incarnation: early Christian theologians on the incarnation and divinization - John 1:14 and the notion of deep incarnation. Deep Incarnation means that "God became flesh for the purpose of reconciling humanity with God and of conjoining God and the world so closely that there can be a future also for a material world characterized by decomposition, frailty and suffering." Niels Gregersen, "Cwr Deus Caro: Jesus and the Cosmos Story" (Theology and Science, vol. 11, Iss. 4, 2013), 375.

The Public Ministry of Jesus - healing people in spirit and body (e.g., the leper in Mark 1:40-45, feeding the hungry crowds, and parables with allusions to nature).

The Death of Jesus: Suffering and loss are common within the natural world, and Paul speaks on the "groaning" of all creation (Rom 8:22). The Word made flesh shared in the experience of death. An ecological Christology then, "interprets the cross, revered as the tree of life, as a sign that divine compassion encompasses the natural world, bearing the cost of new life throughout the endless millennia of dying entailed by evolution." Elizabeth Johnson, "An Earthy Christology,"

The Resurrection of Jesus: "His human life or total embodied history rose with him and was transfigured into a final mode of existence." Gerald O'Collins, Christology, 105. "A piece of this world, real to the core" is now with God in glory. Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, IV, 128.

The Christian notion of salvation is salvation of the world: "The resurrection of Jesus is not only the culmination of the life and death of Jesus, but also the inner meaning of creation. The God who creates is the God who raises Jesus from the dead." -Denis Edwards, How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action (Fortress Press, 2010), 93.

The resurrection discloses that "the evolving world of life, in all its endless permutations, will not be left behind but will likewise be transfigured by the resurrecting action of the Creator Spirit." - Elizabeth Johnson, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 209.

Reflection Questions

1. How do the scientific findings about the origins and development of the universe influence our perception of God and of God's relation to us?
2. Pope Francis says that in creating the world "God in some way sought to limit himself..." What does the idea of divine self-limitation mean to you? Do you agree with it?
3. Do you find Thomas Aquinas' distinction between primary and secondary causality to be helpful in thinking about God's action in creation? If so, in what way?
4. How do we hold together divine transcendence and divine immanence in reflecting on God's relation to creation?
5. In what way does belief in the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus impact a Christian's perception of the natural world?