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Dermot A. Lane

Praying the New Cosmology

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There is for some a tension, even a conflict, between religion and science. This tension can be felt most acutely when it comes to prayer. The way we pray and the language we use often clash with what we know about the universe through the new cosmologies. There is a cultural conflict for many, even a cognitive dissonance at times, between prayer and cosmology. Our prayers seem to operate out of an understanding of the universe that is very different to the understanding of the universe disclosed by modern science.

The question I want to examine in this paper can be framed in the following way: Is it possible to integrate our prayer-life with the new cosmology. How might the new cosmologies help our prayer life? Is the gap between religion and science too big to bridge when we pray? Another way of articulating the question is to note that many of us have grown up in a 3 storied universe, a universe made up of the heavens above, the underworld below, and life lived on a flat earth. It is within that old cosmology, that is the three-storied universe, that many of our prayers are framed.

And yet we know from colourful magazines like the *National Geographic* and popular television programmes like David Attenborough on BBC that our universe is far more complex, far more fascinating, far more ancient than the 3 storied universe.

We now know according to the findings of modern cosmology that we are living in an ever-expanding cosmos, going back some 13.8 billion years, that we belong to an evolving earth that is 4.5 billion years old, and that we are part of an emerging community of human beings that is only 200,000 years old.

I can hear the reader wondering: Why is he raising these awkward questions? Does he not realise that religion and science contradict each other? Is he not historically aware that Galileo and Darwin ran into trouble over questions like these?

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The principal reason I am raising these questions is that there is a close relationship between how we pray and what we believe. The way we pray influences what we believe. This is a highly respected and well established liturgical principle that goes back to the 5th century of Christianity. The principle states that the way you pray shapes what you believe. This principle is summed up in the Latin expression: *lex orandi, lex credendi* which literally means the law of prayer is the law of belief.

Originally this principle was understood as a one-way movement from liturgy to belief. Over time, it became clear that there should be a two-way movement, from prayer to belief and belief to prayer. We need in the light of the extra ordinary advances of science in the 20th and 21st century to examine this two-way relationship.

There are many reasons why we must look at the connection between prayer and belief in the context of the new cosmologies. The relationship between religion and science has changed in the last 50 years, moving from one of hostility and conflict to one of respect and dialogue. It is pointed out and agreed by many that science can rid religion of error and superstition, and that religion can purify science from idolatry and a false absolutism.¹

Another reason for examining the relationship between prayer and cosmology is that most young people have grown up in a world which takes for granted that we live in an unfolding cosmos and an evolving earth. If this generation of young people do not find at least some echo of the new cosmology within prayer and liturgy, then they will simply walk away from religion.

There is another reason for addressing the question of the relationship between prayer and the new cosmology. Many would hold that contemporary science offers more reasons – not less – for the cultivating a life of prayer and worship. The discoveries of the new cosmology open up extra-ordinary levels of beauty, of order and of symmetry in our cosmos; these experiences evoke within us responses of awe and wonder, amazement and humility, praise and gratitude. It is responses like these that are at the heart of prayer and the foundation of worship.

So, far from diminishing the need for prayer or threatening the role of liturgy, the new cosmologies have the potential to deepen our experience of prayer and worship.

A further reason for looking at the relationship between religion and science and its impact on prayer is the reality of climate change and the ecological crisis. The World Council of churches back in 1990 pointed out that our planet is in peril. More recently, we have had the ground-breaking encyclical of Pope Francis entitled *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, published on the

1 E.g., John Paul II, "Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II ", 1 June 1988.

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feast of Pentecost three years ago, on 24 May 2015. This encyclical was followed up by the United Nations Climate Agreement in December 2015 at Paris(COP1). This agreement called upon the countries of the world to decarbonise the economy, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to create new forms of energy. 195 nations signed up to this agreement, including Ireland, and made a commitment to address these urgent issues.

It is increasingly clear that if we are to save the planet, we need the resources of religion and science working together and this includes harnessing the power of prayer and worship in the service of our common home as suggested by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*.²

It is not just an accident, or a coincidence, that we are discussing the possibility of praying the new cosmology on the feast of Pentecost 2018. There is a close connection between the Spirit and Cosmology, between a renewed theology of the Holy Spirit and the new cosmologies. One of the keys to this new relationship between the Spirit and cosmology is to be found in the Jewish theology of the Holy Spirit as expressed in the book of Genesis and other books of the Hebrew scriptures.

In addition to this rapport between Spirit and cosmology, there is also an impulse coming from the new cosmology that resonates with the biblical understanding of the Spirit. A striking convergence is at present taking place between the new cosmology and pneumatology, that is, between science and the life of the Spirit.

Let us look briefly, first of all, at the biblical theology of the Spirit in the book of Genesis. The opening verses of Genesis talk about 'the breath of God', that is the Spirit of God, sweeping over the waters of chaos (Gen.1:1-2). A better translation would be to talk about the Spirit of God hovering over the chaos, brooding as it were, like a mother hen over her nest. This hovering of the Spirit over the waters, this brooding of the Spirit, brings forth light and darkness, day and night, water, land and vegetation, seasons and years, stars and sky – all of which we are told: "And God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:25)

The breath of God animates creation and this process reaches a climax when we are told in the second creation story that the "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). The breath of God which enlivens creation is the same breath of God that inspires the creation of the human. There is a remarkable unity between the action of the Spirit in creation and the action of the same Spirit in the moulding of the human.

2 *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, 2015: 235-236

The human, created out of the dust of the earth, might be better called ‘an earthling’, or ‘a worldling’ or ‘a groundling’. As humans, we are *of* the earth and belong *to* the earth and, therefore, we are better understood as ‘earthlings’. There is an interplay between the breath of God brooding over the chaos of the waters and the action of the Spirit animating the dust of the earth in the creation of human. This outpouring of the Spirit at the dawn of time is sometimes called the First Pentecost. The Spirit of God that animates the whole of creation from the beginning of time is the same Spirit holding the universe and humanity together in continuous existence. This theme of the action of the Spirit is also contained in other books of the Hebrew Bible, especially in the Psalter. For example, Psalm 33:6 points out “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their hosts by the Breath of his mouth”. Or again, Psalm 104:29-30 is quite explicit: “When you hide your face they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send forth your Spirit they are created and you renew the face of the earth”.

The whole of creation and every human being is “en-Spirited”, that is, graced from the dawn of time and continuously gifted by the vivifying Spirit of God. The Spirit who in-habits creation and groans within creation is in a way similar to that of the Spirit indwells human beings, prompting them to cry out *Abba*, Father (Rom.8 15 and 22). These are some of the impulses coming from a renewed theology of the Spirit that resonate with the new cosmology.

Let us look at some of the insights coming from the new cosmology that might prompt prayer and liturgy. The one thing emphasised by the new cosmology is the given materiality of the universe, a materiality that is not inert or empty or dead; instead it is a materiality that is alive with a pneumatic presence that moves from the Big Bang to energy, to galaxies, to earth, to matter, to molecules, to biological life, to human existence, to consciousness, to self-consciousness, to reflective self-consciousness, to religious consciousness, and to an underlying communion within this rich diversity.

The red thread running through this extra ordinary story of the cosmos, of the earth, and of humans is the dynamic presence of materiality, a materiality that is bubbling with life, creativity, and energy.

Scientists today tell us that if we are to understand this principle of materiality we must look at the inside as well as the outside of matter. There is an interiority to all of matter just as there is an exteriority to matter. The advances of science in the last 50 years, especially in terms of developing new, powerful microscopes and

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the new nano-technology have enabled scientists to see, in a way never before possible, into the fascinating inside world of matter. This new technology reveals something of the micro-architecture of the inside of matter, compared by some to the mind blowing inside of a beehive.³

One scientist who anticipated the significance of the inside and outside of matter was the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Teilhard throughout his life as a scientist was fascinated by matter. As a scientist and a theologian, he wrote a celebrated 20 verse “Hymn to Matter” some 100 years ago. A sample of what he wrote in that Hymn of praise to matter would include: “Blessedly be you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock ... Without you ... we should remain all our lives on earth, ignorant both of ourselves and of God”. He then goes on to say: “I acclaim you, (that is matter), as the divine milieu, charged with creative power, as the ocean stirred by the Spirit, as the clay moulded and infused by the Incarnate Word”⁴ Matter, for Teilhard, was the place where the divine resides. This insight was developed and refined further by Teilhard in 1936 when he wrote: “All that exists is matter becoming Spirit. There is neither Spirit nor matter in the world; (instead), the stuff of the universe is Spirit – matter. No other substance but this could produce the human molecule”. Some time later, he wrote: “The time has come for us to realise that to be satisfactory, any interpretation of the universe... must cover the inside as well as the outside of things – the Spirit as well as matter”⁵

In the light of these impulses coming from a theology of Spirit, as the energy driving the cosmic story, and from cosmology, about the revelation of the interiority of matter, we can begin to move towards a tentative synthesis.

It is the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who spins the globe:

- who powers the unfolding of the cosmos 13.8 billion years ago
- who enables the evolution of biological life some 4.5 billion years ago
- who inspires the emergence of every human being some 200,000 years ago

It is the same Spirit

- who ‘midwives’ the new in human affairs, in the arts, and in the sciences
- who raises up the broken and the bruised
- who holds together in a creative unity the opposites of life and death, light and darkness, cross and resurrection

3 John Feehan, *The Dipper’s Acclaim and Other essays*, Dalgan Park: Columban Ecological Institute, 2016: p.82

4 Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, London: Collins, 1965, p.68- 71

5 *The Human Phenomenon*, Oregon : Sussex Academic Press, 1999, p.6.

In brief, it can be said symbolically that the Spirit sleeps in stones, dreams in flowers, and dances in human beings. If this is the case, then we can surely pray and worship in a new key, giving thanks to God for all that is and all that is yet to come in and through the creative power of the Holy Spirit present throughout the universe. Further, praying the new cosmology has the potential to put us back in touch with the forgotten gift of the Holy Spirit and to reawaken our consciousness to the pervasive presence of that gift in the world.

The Church of Adam and Eve. We in Ireland love to point out our Mass Rocks; those old stones in remote glens and on sheltered hillsides, where, in the dark days of persecution, our priests offered the Holy Sacrifice. Adam and Eve, in the very heart of Dublin, is just such a place. The Franciscans, right under the shadow of Dublin Castle, ministered to the spiritual needs of the people here.

Expelled from their friary in Francis Street – where the Church of St Nicholas now stands – the friars finally settled in a small house in Cook Street at the back of a tavern called Adam and Eve. Each Sunday the people walked boldly to the inn, through the door of Adam and Eve and into the room where the friars offered Mass.