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Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* and Christian Cosmology

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BY
ALEXANDER MICHAEL PECK

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This short paper addresses the question as to whether Thomas Traherne (1637-1674) in his work, *Centuries of Meditations* (1908), captures the essential Christian attitude to the cosmos. A starting place, therefore, is to briefly explore what may be considered a Christian’s essential attitude toward the cosmos.

A Christian View of the Cosmos

Sacred cosmology. It can be argued that a necessary Christian attitude to the cosmos is one in which cosmology is viewed as sacred – that is, a sense of the sacred is upheld in discussing the cosmos.¹ This entails the understanding of the ancient Church that the universe, far from being either an illusion or a vast mindless material force, is a divine revelation and a sacred means of enlightenment, salvation, and “at-one-ment”.²

Interrelationship of all creation. A Christian cosmic view recognizes there is a relationship of interdependence, interpenetration, and reciprocity between God, humankind, and creation.³ This parallels the Orthodox Christian tradition which throughout its 2,000 year history has presented a world-view that is “theoanthropocosmic”.⁴ In one of his poems, St. Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373) symbolizes God as the water, and all creatures as sea creatures. Just like the sea, God both transcends and contains his creatures.

¹ Vincent Rossi, “Sacred Cosmology in the Christian Tradition”, *The Ecologist* (January 2000), http://jbburnett.com/resources/rossi_sacred-cosmos.pdf I am indebted to Rossi for the term “sacred cosmology”.

² Ibid. Note: Vincent Rossi is an Eastern Orthodox theologian, environmentalist, and founder of *Epiphany*, a quarterly journal on traditional Christian spirituality. He is an Associate of the world Stewardship Institute in Santa Rosa, California.

³ Philip Sherrard, *Human Image, World Image* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1992), 243; quoted in Rossi, “Sacred Cosmology in the Christian Tradition”.

⁴ Rossi, “Sacred Cosmology in the Christian Tradition”. The term, “theoanthropocosmic”, was coined by Philip Sherrard. See *Human Image, World Image*.

He is over all things, as well as in and around and embracing them. The separation implied in divine transcendence does not nullify the unity implied in divine immanence.⁵

Cosmic Christological orientation. Finally, the Christian realizes that the cosmos manifests an order that simultaneously transcends it, sustains it from within, and manifests itself through it.⁶ This transcendent, intrinsic, immanent order is the Logos – the eternal son of God.⁷ The term “Logos” in Christian theology combines its Greek philosophical meaning of an all-encompassing rational order uniting nature, society, individual humans, and divinity into “a great cosmos”⁸ with the Christian theological meaning of Christ, the Word (Logos) of God, in, through, and by whom all things are created and “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).⁹

Traherne’s *Centuries of Meditations* and Cosmology

Having presented a basic Christian attitude toward the cosmos, this paper suggests that Traherne’s *Centuries of Meditations* echoes this attitude.

⁵ Ibid. Rossi quotes the poem from St. Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373), hymnographer and theologian, as follows:

As the water surrounds the fish and it feels it,
So also do all natures feel God.
He is diffused through the air,
And with thy breath enters into thy midst.
He is mingled with the light,
And enters, when thou seest, into thy eyes.
He is mingled with thy spirit,
And examines thee from within, as to what thou art.
In thy soul He dwells ...”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 349; quoted in Rossi, “Sacred Cosmology in the Christian Tradition”.

⁹ Rossi, “Sacred Cosmology in the Christian Tradition”. Furthermore, Rossi states that a cosmic Christological perspective understands that “in the new order inaugurated by the Incarnation of Christ, the Church is the new cosmos. The Church is the Body of Christ, which is the new creation. As such, the Church is the destiny of the cosmos. The Church is the cosmos becoming itself, what it truly is to be – its end – as intended by God. The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ, which is the reconciliation, unification and glorification, not only of human beings, but of all things in the universe.”

First, in the *Centuries*, Traherne clearly presents a *sacred cosmic awareness* that transcends this earth. He writes, for example, that “to be acquainted with celestial things is not only to know them, but by frequent meditation to be familiar with them . . . those things which appeared like shady clouds become solid realities.”¹⁰ Another instance of a cosmic view is when he reflects that “contemplation of eternity makes the soul immortal.”¹¹ Furthermore: “Whose glory it is, that it can see before and after its existence into endless spaces . . . O what glorious creatures should we be could we be present in spirit with all Eternity! How wise, would we esteem this presence of the understanding, to be more real than that of our bodies!”¹²

Second, the *relatedness of all things* undergirds Traherne’s cosmic view.¹³ As an example, he writes: “You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars.”¹⁴ Further he states, “till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels”.¹⁵ Gladys I. Wade, Traherne’s biographer, writes that “the part, every tiniest fragment of it, is for him flooded

¹⁰ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: Bertram Dobell, 1908), 4:96. Traherne’s practice of meditation is also alluded to in the words that “if you will be lazy and not meditate, you lose all” (4:95).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:55.

¹² *Ibid.* William J. Wolf, “The Spirituality of Thomas Traherne”, in *Anglican Spirituality* (Connecticut: Morehouse-Barlow Co. Inc., 1982), 49-68. Wolf shows that Traherne’s sacred cosmological view is aided through meditation which yields “a conviction of their spiritual reality” (page 63). This is achieved through a “meditational path of communing with all things until a perception of their glory and beauty and a lively sense of their interrelationship is seen” (page 62-63). As Wolf further writes, “the spiritual power of the human imagination can create worlds even more beautiful than our universe. We see here the divine dimension of humanity” (page 63). Or, in Traherne’s words: “The world within you is an offering returned, which is infinitely more acceptable to God Almighty, since it came from Him, that it might return unto Him. Wherein the mystery is great. For God hath made you able to create worlds in your own mind which are more precious unto Him than those which He created . . .” (Traherne, 2:90).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62. This interrelationship – or “bond of union between all creatures” – is based on love. Traherne writes: “By Love our Souls are married and solder’d to the creatures and it is our Duty like God to be united to them all” (2:66). Further, Wolf states that “through being created in the image of God, a person becomes co-creator with God himself” – this also implies a human interrelationship to the whole cosmos. In Traherne’s words: “I perceived that we were to live the life of God, when we lived the true life of nature according to knowledge” (3:58).

¹⁴ Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, 1:29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:30.

by the light of the whole.”¹⁶ Moreover, an implication of the interrelationship of all things is the “ecological relatedness of the creation”.¹⁷ Traherne states: “Yea, one act only of despite done to the smallest creature made you infinitely deformed.”¹⁸ Interestingly, in polluting the planet and destroying flora and fauna, for example, an inbuilt judgment automatically diminishes the quality of life.¹⁹

Finally, in his sacred cosmological view, Traherne maintains the *centrality of a cosmic Christological orientation*.²⁰ This can be seen, for example, in the latter part of the “First Century” where there are meditations upon the cross.²¹ With his cosmic Christological perspective, Traherne does not excessively focus on the topics of sinfulness, the Incarnation, and the atonement of Christ.²² For instance, as Wolf notes, “his principle of the coinherence of all reality finds its climax as the Son, through whom all things were made, dies upon the sacred tree to which all of creation silently bows in adoration.”²³ Traherne writes: “To this poor, bleeding, naked Man did all the corn and wine, and oil, and gold and silver in the world minister in an invisible manner, even as He was exposed lying and dying upon the Cross.”²⁴

Conclusion

In closing, one may conclude that Traherne does capture an essential Christian attitude toward the cosmos by upholding a sacred cosmology, by perceiving the interrelationship of all things, and by maintaining the centrality of the cosmic Christ.

¹⁶ Gladys I. Wade, *Thomas Traherne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 210; quoted in Wolf, “The Spirituality of Thomas Traherne”, 62.

¹⁷ Wolf, “The Spirituality of Thomas Traherne”, 62.

¹⁸ Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, 2:30.

¹⁹ Wolf, “The Spirituality of Thomas Traherne”, 62.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹ *Ibid.* According to Wolf, the meditations on the cross suggest Traherne’s other work entitled *Meditations and Devotions on the Life of Christ* (pages 61, 63).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, 1:60.

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