

Sydney College of Divinity

**A Theology of Creation Linking Humanity, the Cosmos, and Christ**

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## **A Theology of Creation Linking Humanity, the Cosmos, and Christ**

This paper attempts to show that a sound theology of creation must demonstrate the integral relationships connecting humanity, the cosmos, and Christ.

To achieve this, within the space parameters of this paper, three relevant themes will be addressed: matter and spirit, the future of the cosmos, and understanding the cosmic Christ.<sup>1</sup>

### **Humanity – Matter and Spirit**

A theology of creation necessitates addressing the relationship between matter and spirit. Two views may be considered – one, adhering to a separation between matter and spirit; or, second, recognizing a unity of matter and spirit.

#### Disconnection between Matter and Spirit

A dualistic view, with its distrust of the material world, can in part be traced to Hellenistic culture which was permeated with prejudice against bodilyness.<sup>2</sup> Clancy notes that “there was a neo-Platonic aversion to bodilyness”<sup>3</sup> – in fact, “distance from the world of matter was in direct proportion to proximity to God.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a longer paper, other relevant and related themes could have been included such as the Incarnation and an evolutionary view.

<sup>2</sup> Jeannette Clancy, “The Cosmic Christ: An Inclusive Christ”, *Sisters Today* 54:4 (December 1987), 199.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 199.

Origen, one of the Church fathers, also did not affirm matter.<sup>5</sup> He conjectured that the world fell into a state of corruption from a previous state of harmony with God – accordingly, evil became associated with physicality.<sup>6</sup>

This non-affirmative view of matter resulted in a number of difficulties. To begin with, a problem of logic exists – the creation, described in Genesis 1 as coming from the hand of God, is presented as “very good” (Gen 1:31).<sup>7</sup> Further problems emerged. Augustine and others equated sexuality with sinfulness, and purity even came to mean absence of sexual expression.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, women were regarded at a lower level of bodiliness and associated with sinfulness.<sup>9</sup> As a further outgrowth of separating matter and spirit, theology became excessively rational and a dualistic split arose between this world and the next.<sup>10</sup> Finally, in the western world, the disjunction between matter and spirit has led to a tendency for individuals to be out of touch with the body, resulting among other things in emotional repression and a neglect of right-brain development.<sup>11</sup>

### Unity of Matter and Spirit

The biblical view of reality, on the other hand, is *not* dualistic. Clancy correctly clarifies the use of the terms “flesh”, “spirit”, and “world”:

Paul’s *sarx*, translated “flesh” was not the pejorative term associated with corrupt carnality that it later became. It was distinguished from “spirit” and designated the whole external human being apart from interiority and apart from the holiness of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Clancy, “The Cosmic Christ: An Inclusive Christ”, 199.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 200-201.

the Creator. The “world” of Paul was not material reality, but the web of faulted human relationships, as in the “wisdom of the world” in First Corinthians.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, in contrast to the classical viewpoint, epistemology today shows an inherent connection between mind and matter.<sup>13</sup> Scientific studies are continuing to establish the link between visible and invisible reality.<sup>14</sup> Again, Clancy aptly supports this:

The fallacy of that dualistic perception is evident when one grasps the scientific truth . . . [that] matter and energy run together; they constantly interact; consciousness shapes reality as reality shapes consciousness; the universe is a mass of visible and invisible items of reality in exciting relationships with each other.<sup>15</sup>

From this evidence, the unity of matter and spirit in the human person is demonstrated. As Edwards concludes, matter and spirit are two related components of the one human person – they are inseparable from each other, but cannot be reduced one to the other (an essential difference remains between them).<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, as Rahner argues, there is but one history of matter and spirit – in other words, the story of the cosmos and the story of humanity, involving matter and spirit, is a single

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 199. Maloney adds that *sarx* “represents man in all his creaturehood in contrast to God – man, not only in his distance and difference from God, in his mortality and weakness, but also in his utter estrangement from God through sin” (George Maloney, *The Cosmic Christ* [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968], 21).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 202-203.

<sup>16</sup> Denis Edwards, “The Cosmic Theology of Karl Rahner”, *Compass Theological Review* 1 (1990): 38. In connection with this discussion of matter and spirit, it is also interesting to note that “Gnostic forms of Christianity have always tended to see God approaching humanity purely at the level of the spirit. But the Christian message is that the Word became *flesh*, the Word became *matter*. The word ‘incarnation’ means, literally, ‘becoming flesh’ (from Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* [Homebush: St Paul’s Publications, 1991], 83.)

story.<sup>17</sup> The spirit, then, is not something added to the body – rather, the body is the concrete existence, or self-expression, of the spirit itself in time and space.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, the connectedness or unity between matter and spirit in the human person and universe better integrates the relationships connecting humanity, the cosmos, and Christ, than would a dualistic view of reality.

### **The Cosmos – Its Future**

A theology of creation also calls for dealing with the future of the universe, including planet Earth. Two alternatives may again be considered – one, a destruction of the universe; or second, a transformation of the present order.

#### Destruction of the Universe

From a reading of 2 Peter 3:10-12, and similar passages, some conclude that the universe will be destroyed:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The *heavens will disappear* with a roar; *the elements will be destroyed* by fire, and *the earth and everything in it will be laid bare* (v. 10). Since *everything will be destroyed* in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives (v. 11) as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the *destruction of the heavens* by fire, and *the elements will melt in the heat* (v. 12) [emphasis mine].<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>19</sup> Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 2403-2404.

While such passages (see also Isaiah 34:4; Joel 2:10; Mark 13:24-25; Revelation 6:12-13) seem to show “a fiery disintegration of the very heavens”<sup>20</sup>, exegetical wisdom is needed. Used here is apocalyptic language, common to books such as Daniel and Revelation.<sup>21</sup> For that reason, complete literalism is not intended; rather, the figurative nature of such writings needs to be respected.<sup>22</sup> Also, exegetically, for example, the word “elements” (v. 10) is from the Greek word *stoicheia* and could be stars (heavenly bodies) or the basic physical materials that make up the world.<sup>23</sup> In the New Testament period, the “elements” commonly thought of were earth, water, air, and fire.<sup>24</sup>

Problems exist with this perspective. God’s purpose for people and the universe is not destruction.<sup>25</sup> He does not create for frustration, death, or annihilation.<sup>26</sup> Rather, a transformation or re-creation is involved (see for example, Isaiah 66:22; Revelation 21-22).<sup>27</sup> Associated with this view are two related difficulties – the first is a purely spiritual interpretation of God’s reign, and secondly, consigning that reign simply to the “next life”.<sup>28</sup> Both are a misreading of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Edwin A. Blum, “2 Peter,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 287.

<sup>21</sup> Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 2403.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Blum, “2 Peter”, 286.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1989), 2199.

<sup>26</sup> George Maloney, *The Cosmic Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 41.

<sup>27</sup> *Life Application Bible*, 2199.

<sup>28</sup> Clancy, “The Cosmic Christ: An Inclusive Christ”, 199.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

### Transformation of the Universe

The second position is that the whole universe will not be destroyed, but will be transformed in the parousia or final coming of Christ in glory at the end of time.<sup>30</sup>

Both the God-created spirit *and* body will be brought to the fulfilment God had planned in his original creation of man through the glorious resurrected life of the Saviour.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, Scripture shows that in the same way as the material body will be transformed and not destroyed, so likewise it will be for the total cosmos (see 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 and Romans 8:19-22).<sup>32</sup> “It likewise,” writes Maloney, “was created by God for a purpose intimately connected with the end God had in creating man, namely, that the whole created order be brought into the glorification of the full Body of Christ.”<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, Christ as head of the created cosmos, will then bring it back – complete and full – to its Maker and final end (1 Cor 15:28).<sup>34</sup>

For a theology of creation, then, the transformation of the universe better integrates the relationships connecting humanity, the cosmos, and Christ than does a belief in the destruction of the universe.

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<sup>30</sup> Maloney, *The Cosmic Christ*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

## Christ – Understanding the Cosmic Christ<sup>35</sup>

A theology of creation requires understanding the cosmic Christ.<sup>36</sup> Two alternatives may once more be considered – the first, a static and passive perspective of Christ; the second, a progressive and unfolding view.

### A Static View

A static view of Christ includes the following elements: Christ is seen only as a person; the redemptive death of Jesus freed humanity forever from evil; Christ was necessary to redeem human brokenness; Jesus is the unique incarnation of God's Word; and God is beyond the visible universe.<sup>37</sup>

A theology of creation based on this type of perspective of Christ is limiting. It results in tendencies to overly bemoan one's wretched sinfulness, to wait for redemption only in the "next world", and to statically and passively worship the Redeemer.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Clancy, "The Cosmic Christ: An Inclusive Christ", 197. She writes that the book of Colossians shows that "in the person of Christ everything is to be reconciled, so that Christ is seen as the goal and unifying principle of all creation. This is *the pre-eminent scriptural basis for the idea of the cosmic Christ* [emphasis mine]."(See Col 1:15-20.)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 197-198. Clancy states that "some of the most important early writers of Christianity also had a view of Christ as cosmic." These included Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, and Maximus. They all wrote about "an immanent Logos which bonds, directs, sustains, and fulfils the created world."

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 205. A static view is limiting. Teilhard de Chardin goes beyond such a view when he writes that "what is to be brought about is more than a simple union: it is a *transformation*, in the course of which the only thing our human activity can do is, humbly, to make ourselves ready, and to accept (Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* [London: Collins, 1966], 153-154).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 204. In connection with a static view of Christ, the traditional view of redemption is where the costly death of Christ was seen as necessary in order to assuage or placate God's righteous anger at human sin. While Paul's language in Romans 3:25-26 seems to fit this idea, such a view does not fit his broader understanding. The whole thrust of Paul's thought emphasizes God's faithfulness and willingness to save. It is faithfulness which impels the Creator to reach out and restore relationship with an erring world. Christ is not a means of overcoming any blockage to forgiveness caused by anger at human sin. Christ works the renewal of relationship (justification) offered by a gracious God.

The reason for Christ's death does not stem from some demand on God's side. The suffering is not a 'cost' that must be paid to God. The cost arises out of the human situation. Christ suffered, not because God directly willed him to suffer and die, but because he embodied God's love, God's faithfulness in a world

### A Progressive and Unfolding View

On the other hand, an expanded view also allows seeing the Christ as a process; that humanity has the responsibility to suffer redemptively; that Christ was necessary to fulfil a divine plan from all eternity; the incarnate Word is operative in the evolution of the cosmos; and God is in the visible universe.<sup>39</sup>

Such a theology better integrates humanity, the cosmos, and Christ. It sees Christ as indeed the cosmic Christ, and the incarnation continues.<sup>40</sup> For Christians, this implies the responsibility to be Christ and to accept accountability for one's condition.<sup>41</sup> "The whole Body," writes Clancy, "is working out salvation history in a continuous passion/death/resurrection."<sup>42</sup> There is redemptive purpose in human pain because those responding to God's grace are participants, not mere spectators, in the unfolding mystery.<sup>43</sup>

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alienated from its Creator, a world where the 'sin' story had set up encased structures of selfishness, self-interest, and pride. (Excerpted and adapted from Brendan Byrne, *Inheriting the Earth* [Homebush: St Paul's Publication, 1990], 41-51.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 205. Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* (Homebush: St Paul's Publications, 1991), 87-88. Relevant here is that there are two theological traditions regarding the incarnation. One focuses on the fact that the incarnation redeems humankind from sin. The other emphasizes that *the incarnation was always part of God's plan*. In the latter, the incarnation is seen as the summit of the plan of creation, rather than mainly the restoration of a world ruined by sin. In this view, "the incarnation would have occurred even if there had been no sin, and even if there was no need of salvation from sin. It was always God's plan to give God's self to creatures in love through the incarnation. God's self-giving, in Jesus of Nazareth, is primarily to be understood simply as an expression of God's boundless love for creation."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 204. Teilhard de Chardin shares an unfolding and progressive view. Notice his reflections: Since Jesus was born, and grew to his full stature, and died, everything has continued to move forward *because Christ is not yet fully formed*: he has not yet gathered about him the last folds of his robe of flesh and of love which is made up of his faithful followers. The mystical Christ and the cosmic Christ have not yet attained to their full growth. Both of these are simultaneously in the *state of being* and *state of becoming* (Excerpted and adapted from Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* [London: Collins, 1966], 133).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

To conclude, a table in the Appendix shows how three premises – the unity of matter and spirit, the transformation of the universe, and an expanded view of Christ – would better serve toward establishing a sound theology of creation, linking humanity, the cosmos, and Christ.

## Appendix

**A Theology of Creation Linking Humanity, the Cosmos, and Christ**

<b>Humanity – Matter and Spirit</b>	
Disconnection of Matter and Spirit	Unity of Matter and Spirit
<i>Liabilities</i>	<i>Assets</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illogic regarding Genesis 1:31</li> <li>• Evil associated with physicality</li> <li>• Sin and sexuality equation</li> <li>• Women and sinfulness</li> <li>• Excessively rational theology</li> <li>• Emotional repression</li> <li>• Neglect of right brain functions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biblical view of reality</li> <li>• Harmonizing of “flesh”, “spirit”, and “world”</li> <li>• Epistemology linking mind and matter</li> <li>• Science regarding visible and invisible realities</li> <li>• Inseparability of matter and spirit</li> <li>• One history of matter and spirit</li> <li>• Body is the self-expression of spirit</li> </ul>
<b>The Cosmos – Its Future</b>	
Destruction of the Universe	Transformation of the Universe
<i>Liabilities</i>	<i>Assets</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor exegesis</li> <li>• God’s purpose not destruction</li> <li>• Creation not for death/annihilation</li> <li>• Purely spiritual view of God’s reign</li> <li>• “Next life” focus for God’s reign</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scriptural basis</li> <li>• Transformation of universe</li> <li>• Body and spirit brought to fulfilment</li> <li>• Created order brought to glorification</li> <li>• Completed cosmos returned to its Maker</li> </ul>
<b>Christ – Understanding the Cosmic Christ</b>	
A Static View	A Progressive and Unfolding View
<i>Liabilities</i>	<i>Assets</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christ only seen as a person</li> <li>• Jesus’ redemptive death freed humanity forever from evil</li> <li>• Christ was necessary to redeem human brokenness</li> <li>• Jesus is the unique incarnation of God’s Word</li> <li>• God is beyond the visible universe</li> <li>• Sinfulness exaggerated</li> <li>• “Other world” emphasis</li> <li>• Passive worship of Christ</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing the Christ as a process</li> <li>• Humanity has a responsibility to suffer redemptively</li> <li>• Christ was necessary to fulfil a divine plan from all eternity</li> <li>• The incarnate Word is operative in the evolution of the cosmos</li> <li>• God is in the visible universe</li> <li>• Cosmic Christ acknowledged</li> <li>• Present Christian responsibility accepted</li> <li>• Paschal mystery lived as participants</li> </ul>

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