Contemplating Planetary Health, Incarnation, and Gratitude

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Those of us teaching in Christian colleges and universities tacitly understand that our integrative task is to connect sociology and Christianity to cultural questions and challenges. I lean into that enthusiastically, and have been grateful for continued opportunities to deepen my theological understandings along the way.[1] The cultural questions that most seized my attention bumped against assumptions evangelical Christians (my original tribe) took for granted, assumptions regarding gender roles, sexuality, our natural world, contentment, and consumerism. I've learned much in my attempts to evaluate a matter from a socio-cultural lens while considering how the theological assumptions of my faith justify or challenge that understanding.

I assume that is a familiar story for many of you. This kind of work requires humility that acknowledges we will not get it right, that we cannot see a thing (including our theological assumptions) without looking through a cultural filter, and so whatever we assert as true, we should assert tentatively. As sociologists, we have an opportunity to use our voices prophetically. Can we do so in ways that build confidence that our faith can come alongside the challenges of our day relevantly, and speak into them?

Let me illustrate with a current cultural question with which I'm wrestling: Earth's ecological well-being. I'm trying to look at this from a biocentric perspective rather an anthropocentric one. Evolution aside, a biocentric perspective itself could pose challenges to some of Christian faith. I'm finding my way forward by bringing pre-modern Christian understandings of incarnation and creation into play.

[1] I'm finishing a course of training at Portland Seminary to become a certified spiritual director and am currently a student in The Living School for Action and Contemplation—a school begun by Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr. That will help explain my emphasis in this essay.

As a sociologist, I might ask what it means to be biocentric (Earth-centered) instead of anthropocentric (human-centered). As a Christian, I wonder what a biocentric Christian faith looks like, and what keeps contemporary Western Christians from being able to embrace it. I would explore where we are seeing shifts in contemporary Christianity that *are* embracing it, and what is helping or hindering the spread of a new paradigm. All this is well and good and the common path of our integrative work in sociology.

I wonder, though, if we have done less than is possible in our integrative efforts because we tend to keep these conversations in our heads. What if we also integrated spirituality in ways that engaged our hearts and bodies with sociological questions? Given that I'm in the midst of readings and spiritual practices aimed at doing just that, I find myself struck by the simplicity of one practice that could perhaps go a long way in engaging ourselves holistically in this question for sure, but likely in other integrative ones as well.

The practice is gratitude toward God, not to be confused with gratitude in general. Gratitude in general (or towards other humans) has received a lot of attention of late, particularly in psychological literature. A 2019 meta-analysis on gratitude and health affirms that grateful people are healthier socially, emotionally, psychologically, and probably (less clear) physically (Jans-Beken, Jacobs, Janssens, Peeters, Reijnders, Lechner, Lataster, 2019).

There is no mention in the meta-analysis of spiritual well-being, and I find that curious. So does a group of Templeton-funded researchers who are reviewing proposals just now to explore how gratitude *toward God* is experienced. Hold that thought and bear with me a moment as I wax theological.

Two traditions emerged in ancient Christianity to explain the incarnation. One, which I'll call Plan B, stresses the incarnation as God's plan to redeem us from sin. Plan A (sometimes called the Scotist position after the Franciscian theologian Duns Scotus) sees the incarnation as the climax of God's plan for creation. The Word would have become flesh whether or not humanity sinned (Edwards, 1991). Creation and incarnation and redemption are all wrapped up in an understanding of a Trinitarian relationship characterized by *kenosis*—the mutual self-emptying, giving, and receiving relationship of a Triune God. God spoke, and in the speaking the Word is poured out into the Universe—the divine made manifest so that all creation carries a spark of the divine, of Christ, who holds all things together (Col. 1:15-20). God's first incarnation, then, was in creating the Universe—God becoming manifest in a material world. The second was when the Word became flesh and walked among us. Jesus comes so that God can be seen, and in the seeing we can know to whom our gratitude for life should be directed. In the seeing we might come to imitate the God in whose image we have been made, and be redeemed from the ways we have failed at gratitude, failed to manifest God in our lives, failed

to love. God so loved the cosmos, that he sent Jesus so that all who believe might be saved (John 3:16). How big is the cosmos God loves? From what all are we in need of being saved?

Plan B, with which we have greater familiarity, answers that rather simply: Jesus was sent to save us from our sin that we might be reconciled to a God who cannot otherwise look upon us, who finds us reprehensible until such reconciliation is accomplished. John 3:16 is understood as God's plan to save humanity, rather than the cosmos, and as such, is mostly about saving our souls for eternity. Matter doesn't much matter. We are to be grateful for our personal salvation.

Plan A is about gratefully living as conduits of God's love in the gift of each moment. In Plan A, God is manifest in trees, in oceans, in mountains, in all living things. (To be clear, God is not the tree, but the Word through whom all was created (John 1) is the Christ who yet holds all creation together.) All of it is sacred, and all of it is an outpouring, a self-emptying, of God's love. Meister Eckhart, a German theologian, philosopher, and mystic from the 13th century, reminds us what early Christians held as true: every creature and created thing are manifestations of God. Each is held and sustained in existence by God. Eckhart says every detail of life is the song God sings, the sermon God preaches, the life God lives. Similarly, Bonaventure, also a scholastic theologian and philosopher of the 13th century (a Franciscan from Italy), reduces the complexity of theology to three simple truths: All things emanate from God, all things exemplify or are manifestations of God, and all things will be consummate eventually, because all things will return to God.

In Plan B Jesus lives only in the hearts of those who receive him, and only souls—human souls—matter in the end.

That I so obviously lean toward Plan A will likely sound heretical to some of you. Be assured this good news gospel is well within Christian thought, kept alive always in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and increasingly emerging in the West through teachers/writers such as Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgealt, and Brian McLaren (to name only a few).

As a sociologist, I ask how Plan B has shaped our culture's understanding of our relationship to the material world. It's a negative question with discouraging answers. I might move to action and try to motivate Christians to embrace Plan A, which might change civic and ecological choices, policies and politics, and that is no small thing. If Christians saw all of creation as sacred, as a manifestation of God, and outpouring of God, we might live differently. As one seeking also to engage her heart and body, I wonder at the power gratitude might additionally exert on our choices if we fostered this virtue in ourselves and in our communities.

I'm currently working with my psychologist husband, Mark on a full proposal for one of those Templeton grants looking at gratitude toward God. If funded, we'll be exploring how gratitude towards God is experienced differently in diverse groups. How do Christians from

historically oppressed groups (Native Americans, African Americans) experience gratitude toward God differently than Evangelicals or Christians from a contemplative tradition or *dones* (those who once identified as Christian and are "done" with religion)? While we are not pursuing a question linking gratitude toward a different relationship with our natural environment directly, I suspect we'll find some interesting connections regarding that relationship from Native American and contemplative Christians, and maybe from the *dones*.

The research and teaching questions we ask as sociologists will serve our students, fellow colleagues, and the larger populace when they are relevant to contemporary issues and concerns. The activist in me suggests they serve better yet when they move us in the direction of hope-inspired change. Plan A does that for me. It inclines me toward a gratitude that wants to honor the gift of life in every moment—not just mine, but other Life with which I'm cohabiting in this space and time. It's hard as a privileged Westerner to do that well, but I'm leaning into the challenge with gratitude as a guiding and driving force.

Perhaps that seems to make too much of gratitude. But then, perhaps not, if what follows gratitude is a desire to pay attention, looking for God manifest in streams, in the setting moon, in the eyes of owls, and in each other. Perhaps what follows is a desire to partner actively with God in the on-going unfolding of a world characterized by shalom—peace because justice prevails. Peace because we inhabit a world of grace, which has been present from the beginning—and because we, along with all creation, are on a long journey that will eventually take us back into God's loving embrace.

References

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