

IN THE BEGINNING.....

Cosmology, the story of creation, of how our universe came to be, has been a source of fascination for us humans since time began. Earlier civilisations that have remained outside the western industrialised model had their own stories and interpretations, as did all of the great religions. Those of us raised in the Judeo-Christian tradition took the Genesis account as ‘fact’ until recent times, when we were warned by biblical scholars against taking it literally. Nevertheless, we continued to see ourselves as being separate from the natural world. We were top-of-the-pile with all other created things – landscape, plants and animals – there for our use and pleasure. We alone had souls and rational powers. God was Jewish, white and male and totally outside of ‘his’ created world. Creation was a once-off event. This earth was a temporary home for us. We took all of this as being ordained by God and not to be questioned. It is out of this worldview that we and all our institutions – churches, governments, education, law, agriculture etc. have operated up until the present time.

What we call the ‘new cosmology’ (i.e. the new understanding of the origins of the universe and of our role in it) has emerged from the accumulated discoveries within various branches of science. We now know that our universe is incredibly old – approx. 15 billion years – and incredibly large – over 100 billion galaxies, each comprised of 100 billion stars and planets. Our earth is a tiny planet orbiting a star, the sun, at the edge of one galaxy. It is the only planet known to be capable of sustaining life.

Central to the new story are the following beliefs:

- ❖ Creation is on-going.
- ❖ We humans share a common origin story with all of creation. We are part of a web of life and of the earth community, not superior to or dominant over any other species but, rather, interconnected with and totally dependent on the other life forms.
- ❖ The Divine Source and Sustainer of life is primarily revealed in every dimension of the natural world.

This view of reality was part of the consciousness of many earlier civilisations that have remained outside the western industrial model and of prophetic figures like Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi. It is now being promoted by people working in the fields of science and theology – Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Fritjof Capra, James Lovelock, Anne Primavesi, Miriam T. McGillis, Sean McDonagh and many others. A worldview such as this calls for a huge shift in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. It asks that we look at the natural world with ‘new’ eyes so that we can behold its innate sacredness and Presence. It asks that we live in reverent relationship with all other created things, acknowledging that each is gifted ‘according to its kind’ and therefore of intrinsic worth and value. We humans, as the self-reflective, self-conscious dimension of the earth are not “stewards” but are called to speak out in justice for all beings who have no voice, to cherish the diversity, uniqueness and communion of all. There are implications for every aspect of our living - for how we shop, cook, educate, farm etc, and for the future of land.

If we want to commit ourselves to this vision, a good starting point would be to use it as a framework for all our decisions, personal and communal, so as to ensure the health and well being of our planet for ourselves and for future generations. We could also use our considerable wisdom, expertise, and resources to negotiate with relevant bodies and organisations by writing or co-signing letters, both steps can be taken from the security and comfort of our own homes.

Frequently asked questions about the new cosmology:

How is it that sisters who profess to care for the earth do not put much energy into interpersonal relationships?

If indeed this is so, one would question their commitment to the earth community, which of course, includes humans. It may be that they have grown tired of the limited and/or traditional ways of relating with people **only** as we have been engaging for all of our lives.

What has this to do with the ‘poor’?

Our own sisters who are engaged in hands-on work with the poor in the economically poor countries, point out to us that poverty is very often caused by the destruction of the natural resources – soil, water, air etc – of these people, in order to accommodate the lifestyle needs of those of us in the western and northern worlds. We may be inspired by a commitment made in the Congregational (Ireland) Chapter gathering 2000: “**That we engage in ongoing processes of awareness raising/education with regard to sensitivity to the living earth/universe and the interconnectedness of the whole community of life and our place within it**”. In Concilium 95/5, (Ecology and Poverty) José Ramos Regidor says that, ‘the option for the poor must be experienced within the more general option for life, for the **integrity of creation** especially where life is most threatened’.

Where do Jesus and the Christian message fit into all of this?

The new cosmology is a story (as was the old one), an interpretation of scientific data. It is not a religion or an ideology. There is nothing in it that would contradict the teaching of Jesus. We read in the gospel stories of his tendency to ‘go apart’ – to the wilderness, mountainsides, lakes – and to use elements from nature to illustrate his teaching. It is also obvious that he had a deep sense of the one-ness of things, e.g. ‘I and the Father are one’. He might, in today’s world, be preaching ‘kindom’ rather than ‘kingdom’.

Why would religious be involved in this work?

Taking on a prophetic stance is an essential element of religious life, The new cosmology is nothing if it is not prophetic. Thomas Berry says, ‘**If in past centuries the role of women religious has been to work principally with the human community in educating and healing, the primary role in the immediate present might be to preserve the earth from future devastation ... It is now unthinkable that any women’s congregation should not be committed as a primary concern and purpose to the saving of the natural world.**’ It would seem that we are now being challenged to take a **planetary** perspective in our work of educating and healing.

And, finally, how best can we learn how to be responsible members of the earth community? A first step might be to respond to Wordsworth's invitation to, '**Come forth into the light of things, let Nature be your teacher!**'

An turas is faide, toснаíonn sé le coiscéim bheag amháin!

(The largest journey begins with one small step)