

The Living Universe *William SSF*



I have mixed feelings about the expression 'God's creation'. A creation is usually an artefact produced by a craftsman or artist. God's creation is the universe - everything, crafted out of nothingness, consisting of innumerable parts and constructed with indescribable complexity. This "watchmaker" image is encouraged and given a sophisticated mien by modern science.

But the Christian image of God is not that of technological genius; it is of parent. A child is not a machine but a living organism, both material and spiritual. When we speak of God's creation, we are using the word creation in a unique sense that not even parenthood quite covers. I suspect popular religious thinking is a bit woolly about what we mean when we speak of God as Creator.

God's creation is the universe. Properly speaking, universe means 'that of which there is only one': the totality of all that exists. (It is not strictly correct to speak, as Stephen Hawking and others do, of multiple universes, however interesting their theories may be.) And our understanding of what the universe is has developed enormously during the last century. The Newtonian image of the universe is a complex collection of inert objects, circling each other in cold, dark space. Along with that goes the notion that humankind is in some sense separate and of a different order of being from everything else: an added extra, so to speak.

During the last century that perception had to go. Scientific thinking, especially in the realms of cosmology and physics, changed radically. The universe is seen now as a living organism, growing, evolving, metabolising. Humankind is no longer seen as an altogether different kind of creature, but collectively as an organ of the cosmos that has evolved by natural process, and by which the universe views itself and thinks about itself. If we can refer to the materialist concept of the universe - the Newton universe - as modern, then science has entered a post-modern era.

In the microcosm of the subatomic world, the change in scientific thinking has been just as revolutionary, in fact the breakthrough really began there. We no longer think of matter as a complex assembly of what my physics master at school called "lots of little chunklets, with a higgledy-piggledy motion", but as

mysterious concentrations of energy that sometimes look like particles and sometimes look like waves in motion. Quite early in the twentieth century, J.B.S.Haldane said that the universe is not only weirder than we thought; it is weirder than we can possibly imagine. One would love to explore this weirdness more fully, but suffice it to say that the old modernist-materialist concept of the universe as a complex but inert material object no longer has credit. In fact, physicists have never been less certain what matter 'really' is.

American physicist Brian Swimme believes that we should think of the universe as a spiritual event rather than a physical entity. Thanks to the seventeenth century philosopher René Descartes, we are in the habit of separating matter and spirit, but I think his critic, George Berkeley, was right in arguing that we need to think monistically, not dualistically about reality, and to think of spirit and matter as one totality of being.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity affirms the unity of matter and spirit. John's Logos embraces everything in the unity of God. Paul had already grasped this (Col. 1) and Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart and Teilhard de Chardin, have led Matthew Fox and others to use the term Cosmic Christ. We have come to see more clearly that God's incarnation or embodiment is not solely in the man Jesus, but in everything - the whole of physical existence. Western Christians are beginning to see the sacredness of material nature, and this was proclaimed and symbolized by Jesus at the Last Supper.

G.K.Chesterton referred to Francis as a nature mystic: he had a deep, spiritual relationship with the physical world and, in calling elements of nature brother and sister, he reflected the Christian understanding of God as parent of all. Nature mysticism has had a revival recently. New-agers, post-modern philosophers, theologians and scientists, have been recovering from what Western society suffered during the modern era - spiritual alienation from the natural world around us. Cartesian dualism invites us to regard ourselves as utterly superior, spiritual beings in a base, material world that is totally at our disposal. This has been a snare and a delusion.

Industrialisation and technology have brought us many blessings but the cost has been too high. Like the Ancient Mariner, our souls are thirsting in a sea of technical marvels and consumer products. Scientists have been telling us for decades that the Earth cannot meet the escalating demands of modern society and, at last, the public is hearing them. We are facing a crisis of survival because of the lifestyle we have become accustomed to, and it is because we have been deaf to the voice of nature.

I think Saint Francis would be less concerned about our affluence than he would about our ignorant, careless and (literally) senseless exploitation of Mother Earth. We need to rediscover the intimate relationship with nature familiar to Australian Aborigines, American Indians and others whom we regard as primitive and uncivilised. We may laugh at "tree huggers", but unless we can feel the anguish of nature, ravaged by industry and commerce;

unless we can learn sympathy for the planet that gave us birth and that still struggles to sustain us, our future is very bleak.

Jesus said, "If you do it to the least of these my brothers you do it to me." This should inform our attitude to what we call "creation" and, for more practical purposes, the environment. For Franciscans, the humblest elements of nature are our brothers and sisters. Scientists and mystics are translating their message to us and we must listen. *f*