

Challenges to faith with a new worldview

The worldview of indigenous cultures always reflects their deep appreciation of the interconnectedness of life. Such primal cultures are sometimes derogatorily called 'primitive', but they hold a sense of how things were, that we have lost. When an old worldview, or way of seeing things, is threatened, advance is sometimes stopped. We learned first that the sun is not the centre of the universe and then that our sun is located in an insignificant place on the Orion arm of our 'Milky Way' galaxy, two-thirds of the way out. It is one of hundreds of billions of suns (stars) in one galaxy, 100,000 light years (95,000,000,000,000,000 kilometres) across, and the Milky Way is one of 200 billion galaxies! We know that we are not standing on our planet. We are 'hanging off' ! Earth is orbiting it's own axis at 1,700 kilometres per hour, circling around the sun at about 10,000 kilometres per hour. The whole solar system circles around the centre of the Milky Way at an incredible 800,000 kilometres per hour.

William Anders was one of the astronauts on Apollo 8 and in December 1968 he took a photograph that 'changed the world'. It became known as 'Earthrise'. It was the first time, we on earth saw ourselves as 'one' and it confirmed that our descriptions of 'sunrise' and 'sunset' are incorrect.

Physicist, Brian Cox suggests that, "The arrow of time creates a bright window in the universe's adolescence, during which life is possible. But it is a window that doesn't stay open for long. As a fraction of the life span of the universe, measured from its beginning (Big Bang) to the evaporation of the last black hole, life as we know it is only possible, for one thousandth of a billion billion billionth, billion billion billionth, billion billion billionth of a percent!"

We cannot comprehend the delicate balance that brought the galaxies into being. It had to be within one trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of one degree! *Physicist. Paul Davies* explained that "You would need the accuracy to fire a bullet at a two centimetre target from one side of the universe to the other. Given that it would take twenty billion years for the light to travel from one side to the other, that accuracy would seem to be impossible."

Discoveries and insights such as this point to the ever appreciated marvel and mystery of life. This provides for an ever greater sense of awe and wonder. Scientists continue to make breakthrough discoveries which affect how we imagine God. We know that our sun is one of hundreds of billions of suns in one (Milky Way) galaxy and there may be 300 billion galaxies! One hundred years ago no one knew that there was more than one galaxy. Ninety per cent of life on earth has been lived in the oceans. Trees and plants emerged 420 million years ago, birds 160 million years ago, flowers 114 million years ago, and Humans just 150,000 years ago. This is clear evidence that not only is earth not the centre of the universe, but nor are humans the centre of Earth.

Our relationship with earth and with other life forms brings a different responsibility from what we have previously believed as our moral responsibility.

Passionist Thomas Berry suggested that we are sensitive to suicide, homicide, and genocide, but have no moral principles for dealing with biocide or geocide. We are able to appreciate more today that God is not only incarnate in humans but the divine presence is everywhere – everything reveals something of God. Creation is the primary revelation of God. St Thomas Aquinas proposed that “a mistake about creation will necessarily result in a mistake about God”

Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution contended that all species are related, that we all have a common ancestor, that mutations occur, species adapt and that those that adapt best, survive. He did not have the language of genes. He called them ‘factors’, but his description that characteristics are passed (factors) on has been confirmed by genetic theory.

In the clearest approval yet of evolution, by a Pope, in November 2014, Pope Francis stated that “Evolution presupposes the creation of beings that evolve.” He said that we must understand that God is not a magician, complete with a magic wand, able to do everything. Rather, God created living beings and let them develop according to internal laws given to each one, so that they would develop and reach their full potential. God gave creation full autonomy while also guaranteeing his constant presence in nature and people’s lives. Francis accepts that God is still creating through self-organising systems. This challenges some people’s idea of God.

These ongoing discoveries affects our worldview and call us to understand that the Bible is a faith book, not a science book. It tells one story of life; the Big Bang tells another story and we are learning to live with both stories. Our worldview cannot be the same as the Scriptures. nor of our grandparents. This includes our ideas about God and what God wants or wills. Does God ‘will’ random events (earthquakes and cancer) or does God continue creating and shaping life through these events?

Without an appreciation of myth, much of the Bible loses it’s meaning, and this is a modern day challenge. That there are two different accounts of creation in the first two Chapters of Genesis, should alert us to this truth. We have everyday myths we treat seriously in regard to children (Santa Claus, Easter Bunny etc). They have meaning for children, but we grow past needing them and as adults we do not treat them literally. We seem not to be able to view the Bible in the same way and we have to face up to the challenges this poses for us.

The Bible’s worldview was of a round earth that sits at the centre of the universe and God’s attention. The Genesis creation story is that of the common cosmology of the ancient Near East in which Earth was a flat disc with infinite water both above and below. The dome of the sky was thought to be a solid metal bowl holding back the water. The stars were embedded in the lower surface of the dome. Gates allowed the Sun and Moon to go back and forth. Beneath the Earth was a fresh-water sea, the source of all fresh-water rivers and wells. In the Dark Ages (5th-11th century) endorsed the accepted worldview of a flat earth and the idea that angels pushed the planets around. For both Copernicus (@1500) and Galileo’ (@1630) the sun was at the centre, not the earth.

We now know that neither the earth, nor the sun, nor the Milky Way galaxy is at the centre of our universe and some of the major discoveries since Darwin have continued to expand our knowledge of the universe and how it works. Edwin Hubble observed what Einstein had calculated; that all the galaxies are receding from what was an original starting point that came to be known as the 'Big Bang'. This was where life started.

Further discoveries have confirmed that every form of life on Earth, including human life, was formed from star dust. This highlighted the inter-connectedness of life, not just on Earth but throughout the universe. In 1900, Max Plank proposed that energy arrives in bundles of potential (quanta) and particles impact on each other even when not physically connected! Once connected always connected!

Sister Ilia Delio claims that, "Scientists have learned that local changes can have global effects because we are deeply connected by fields of energy. Our thoughts as well as our actions impact one another. Even if we are spatially separated, because in our cosmic roots we are deeply entwined".

Quantum physics tells us that the world is nothing like it appears; it is interconnected to the core, a world of probabilities rather than certainties. Not only did this lead to the quantum world which is set to transform technology, but it also confirmed the experiences of interconnectedness and offered spiritual insights into human experiences both of themselves and the divine. Einstein proposed that space and time do not exist separately and matter and energy are different forms of one reality. No matter created in the Big Bang has been lost, and no more has been added.

The universe is one connected whole. God is not located in one place, and certainly God is not sitting above the clouds, despite how frequently people look upwards referring to heaven as 'up there'. God is in the universe, not apart from it. The world does not operate as a predictable (machine) model, but more with a sense of 'chaos', connectedness and mystery. We know that everything, including stars, is born, dies and is 'reborn' and that the universe is self-creating, self-organising and evolving.

We need today, a spirituality of interconnectedness that does not see humans as the ultimate or a separate species. All life is connected, and humans can recognise that the sacred is revealed in every form of life. Indigenous cultures have known this. Some of our language and images are inadequate and always will be, but they need to change and expand. If this doesn't happen at an institutional level, we can at least learn ways to modify our everyday language to express the deeper truths we have learned.

It is no wonder that in the short movie 'The Awakening Universe', Brian Swimme urges us to reflect on the fact that "No matter what being we are talking about on the planet, we are related in terms of energy, we are related in terms of genetics, we are all in one way or another a form of kin— it is overwhelming!"

'The' big discovery of modern science is not just that humans are inter-related, but that every species is related! If we observe the mammals we can easily see that we share the same basic structure, though wings, arms and feet may be used for different purposes. Life is evolving. Creation is not finished. God is not just the creator, God is creating. The universe is self-organising. Galaxies formed the stars, and everything we know was formed from star dust. Our star (sun) formed earth, and earth formed all life here. What was once molten rock has developed into trees, parrots, horses and humans who can sing, dance and create music!

Extinctions have led to new life forms. From a faith perspective, God is still 'everywhere' as the old catechism suggested. God is prompting, inviting, and calling. Therefore 'Life' continues to move 'forward'. Death and destruction are woven into this process, and life triumphs. 'Life is changed, not ended"

We are invited to alter our view of the world. The sun does not rise. Heaven is not up there! We are not stationary. Stars are not 'star' shaped as we draw them, and rather than twinkle, they burn as giant cosmic factories and everything in the universe is created from stardust.

We never have been able to comprehend God but we are starting to see more clearly that the everyday mysteries of life, death and rebirth are deeply imbedded in the circle of life. We must seek within ourselves a sense of awe and reverence for the divine creating presence within and around us – everywhere.

Everything we know (including ourselves) is made of star dust. It is born, dies and is transformed ('reborn'). The universe is self-creating, self-organising and evolving. The universe is us and we are the universe (in human form). All life is connected and the sacred is revealed in every form of life. Indigenous cultures have known this. Some of our language and images are inadequate and always will be, but they need to expand. Brian Swimme says that, No matter what being we are talking about on the planet, "we are related in terms of energy, we are related in terms of genetics, we are all in one way or another a form of kin – it's overwhelming!"

Young people are reaching out beyond a scientific and mechanistic worldview in search of a greater underlying mystery. They are dissatisfied with empty rituals, dualism that separates body and soul and they will not accept authoritarian teaching in their churches. Dogmas and doctrines do not interest them unless they are fundamentalist or neo-conservative. They are growing up with new knowledge, and their questions will be different to many asked in the past. Our prayer, ritual, liturgy, spirituality and theology needs to help them and help us, to relate to God and others. Much of our language no longer fits, if we are honest. Even our church architecture does not fit with our changed awareness of God. We have more questions than answers - but that leads to faith and to hope. God remains a mystery.

It is interesting that many modern scientists respond with awe, in the way many mystics once did, not only to new discoveries, but to what is unknown. Albert Einstein once said that “science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind”. We do not need to fear science, for it reveals truths we need to know and mysteries we need to hold.

Einstein also said that “A human being is a part of a whole, called by us 'universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty”

Our relationship with others, with the earth, with all life that sustains us, is sacred and connected. It is this desire for communion and fellowship that has drawn us to the Passionist Family Group Movement. Through this, we find a way to make sense of Jesus message of the ‘Kingdom’...that everyone is sacred and everyone belongs, and must be included. In Jesus’ cross and Passion, it was all ‘said’Father I put my life in your hands”.

We must also strive to deepen our spirituality to see beyond human fellowship, to the deeper truth that ‘the ‘Family for All’, includes all of God’s creation. Jesus brought a unique message about God. Today, Pope Francis is encouraging us to see that the church is the church of the poor. This was Jesus’ focus – the poor, sinners, the sick and the ‘lost sheep’, first of Israel and then beyond. He kept calling people into a circle, an inclusive family (a family for all) and had them share meals with him. Not only did he speak about this circle of friends, he had people experience this fellowship.

He called God ‘Abba’, an intimate name, a personal name for one’s father. He plunged into the pain of those suffering. He welcomed sinners, ate with the unclean, and told them that God was their ‘abba’ too. He urged them to see that God’s sun and rain fall on the just and the unjust. God is an unconditional loving, dependable, forgiving abba to everyone. This means it is a relationship like a child with a parent, being held, rather than holding.

Jesus praised people, not for keeping laws but because they believed. This was not a belief in doctrines or laws, but in God. Jesus assured them that anyone could be forgiven, and anyone could belong to the circle of God’s intimate family. The loving father forgives his prodigal son. There is no retribution, no explanations asked for and no punishment given! God wants reconciliation and unity. Importantly, he emphasized that God’s kingdom is a happy united family not a conquering empire!

Jesus was betrayed, condemned, humiliated and crucified...a cruel and painful death. Jesus was silent. There was nothing more to be said.

We see God's ways in Jesus.

Our faith task is to seek God, not to seek to understand God. This is a lifelong journey and our hearts are restless, as St Augustine said, "until they rest in Thee".

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