

The Journey of the Universe and Christian Theology: New Foundations for Christian Mysticism

Anne Marie Dalton, Ph.D.
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, Canada

The Journey of the Universe challenges Christian theology in most, if not all, of theology's expressions. It calls for a re-conceiving and a re-formulation of doctrines, rituals, and ethical practices. It is challenging on all levels because it offers a new experience of the sacred. And because it evokes a new *experience* of the sacred, I will consider the implications of *The Journey of the Universe* for Christian mystical theology. The second important impetus for considering mystical theology in this light is my recent realization that for Thomas Berry as well as for other significant leaders in the religion and ecology movement in this century their life's work began in a founding experience. For Berry it was the childhood experience of a beautiful garden against advancing industrialization of his surroundings; for Joseph Sittler, it was also the childhood rural life combined with a religious upbringing; for Rosemary Radford Ruether it was the liberation movements; and John Cobb describes his awakening moment or conversion to a conversation with his son about the ecological crisis in 1969.¹ For the most part, then, the paper explores the question: What difference does *The Journey of the Universe* make to the manner in which Christians experience the Divine? Attempts to address such a large question are necessarily only in very broad strokes not only because of the limit of space, but also because any reliable answers will depend on accounts of how Christians actually do experience the Divine in relation to the journey of the universe.

Traditionally mystical theology often became an examination of the individual "soul", of the stages of its transformation as the individual separates herself/himself from its entanglements with all distractions to focus exclusively on God as the object of love. It is ultimately a theology of union of what in Christian tradition is known as the soul and God. There are, of course, different streams to this tradition—different almost ritualized ways—in which the human person grows in intimacy with the Divine. One way, and the most commonly theologized, follows the way of negation and focuses on ascetical practices designed to discipline the will and the affect in seeking the Divine alone. This is known as the apophatic way. Another, the cataphatic way, is more outward looking and may seek union within the multifarious and beautiful expressions of Divine love in the world. And there are paths that are not so easily labeled as one or the other. Mysticism is by no means confined to Christianity or any other religion. What identifies the mysticism as Christian, however, is the context of the life of Jesus Christ as lived in intimacy with God: "I and the Father are one," Jesus remarks (Jn. 10:30). The goal of Christian mysticism is a relationship of oneness with the Divine, an intimate sharing in the life

¹ Cf. Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 40-52.

of God based on the oneness of the Trinity. The means by which one acquires this state of union is known as contemplation.

In the Western Christian tradition, theology and mysticism itself have often been viewed as quite distinct, even contrasting. Henri Bergson spoke of theology as static and dogmatic, but mysticism itself as dynamic and creative. For Julian of Norwich the showings, her gaze into the face of the Divine, were seen by her as largely a matter of the heart. Whereas for the most part, theology, in the West, became a rational affair, a matter of the head, in Eastern Christian tradition the same dualism does not exist. Theology itself is seen as mystical. The experience of the Divine is considered the beginning and the crown of all theology. Hence, the Eastern Churches focuses on the Gospel of John, the most mystical of the four Gospels.

Throughout history, Christian theologians and mystics themselves have attempted to articulate the process of contemplation by which humans enter into the intimacy of Divine love. A few have even described the steps by which this union is attained; Teresa of Avila is perhaps the most famous in her careful self-reflection on her journey to such intimacy in the *Interior Castle*. Others have parted intellectual ways in understanding mysticism as something one can attain through contemplative practice or as exclusively the gift of God. A critical and comprehensive study of the implications of *The Journey of the Universe* for mystical theology would involve an engagement with many of these traditional streams of understanding. What is clearly common to all of them, however, is the notion of intimacy with the Divine, a numinous experience that defies full rationalization.

In the twentieth century, theologians and religious scholars such as Thomas Merton, Grace Jantzen, Simone Weil, William Harmless and Amy Hollywood (to name a few) have attempted to re-interpret the experience of mysticism in contemporary terms.² They have drawn attention to the experience of intimacy with the Divine reflected in human history through the lens of the suffering and oppressed, of feminism and gender studies and of new developments in the understandings of language. Such scholars have redeemed mysticism from the esoteric to a central place in human life. They have also stressed the contextual nature of mystical theology.

A number of theologians and religion scholars have already noted that the ecological crisis itself calls for a new kind of devotion. Speaking of creation as the subject of contemplation, John Chryssavgis observed, "I believe that the apophatic dimension is wonderfully, indeed "naturally" fostered in creation. The breadth and beauty of this earth is a reflection of the boundlessness and splendor of Divine grace; and our respect for the environment results in a parallel allowance for the surprising abyss of God. Our admiration for creation reflects our adoration of the

² Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. 2nd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 1st ed. 1973; Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (Paulist Press, 2000); Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (RoutledgeKeganPaul Press, 1951) and *Gravity and Grace* (Routledge, 1987), 1st English ed. 1952; William Harmless, SJ, *Mystics* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

absolute, a vocation to the beyond, an invitation to transfiguration.”³ Douglas Burton-Christie has also connected prayer to attentiveness to the voices of the earth especially as heard in the words of nature poets.⁴ There are also many who promote nature mysticism. Matthew Fox and Barry Lopez may be counted among these. These calls for a new kind of devotion in the light of the ecological crisis definitely open places of connection between Christian contemplation and the new urgency about human relationship to the earth. I believe *The Journey of the Universe* pushes Christian mysticism even further in setting a context for a re-thinking of human union with the Divine.

In the wonderful manner of Thomas Berry, I will suggest a number of avenues of exploration (he might more courageously call them principles!) for the mutual engagement of *The Journey of the Universe* with some of the foundations of Christian mystical theology.

1. Humans are not the only beings that contemplate the Divine and achieve intimacy; all of creation does. “The Heavens proclaim the glory of God, heaven’s vault makes known his handiwork,” (Ps. 19: 1). The Psalms are replete with images and references to the intimacy of God with creation. The book of Job also details in very intimate fashion the relationship of God to God’s creatures. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin referred to the world as the ‘Divine milieu.’ Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker observe, we are “in the midst of an ocean of intimacy.”⁵ These descriptions however are not synonymous. The intimacy of the universe as portrayed in *The Journey of the Universe* calls for an intimacy with the creatures themselves, not only as a passageway to the Divine. By analogy, we do not appreciate an art piece only for the sake of the artist. Yet the art piece does take us beyond itself. To what? Except in the case of Deism, Christian tradition holds that God is present in the particularities of creation, not only as a kind of Prime Mover, but also in the very nitty gritty of existence. *The Journey of the Universe* awakens the Christian to a further exploration of what this kind of presence means.

2. The human is that being who reflects on and articulates the mutual gaze and ultimate union of the Divine with her/his creation. In the human, the experience of joy and of suffering encompassed by the journey to unity with the Divine is made explicit in language. There were many dark nights of isolation and aloneness as the universe brought forth the next stage of its emergence. There were also moments of great exhilaration and of ecstasy. This is *The Journey of the Universe*. Christian mystics also spoke of a journey, that of the human soul to union with the Divine. According to Esther DeWaal, Celtic mysticism, in particular, is characterized by this

³ John Chryssavgis, “The World of the Icon and Creation,” *Christianity and Ecology: Christianity and Ecology*, eds., Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard/CSWR, 2000), p. 94.

⁴ Douglas Burton-Christie, “Words Beneath the Water: Logos, Cosmos, and the Spirit of Place,” *Christianity and Ecology*, p. 329.

⁵ Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe*, p. 115.

sense of the on-going journey ever open to transforming change.⁶ *The Journey of the Universe* enlarges our sense of that journey not only in the vast stretch of time but in the largeness of space that is a mutual accompaniment.

3. Mysticism takes place within particular contexts and under particular horizons; *The Journey of the Universe* provides a compelling context under the horizon of ecological urgency for Christian mysticism in our time. An experience of the universe as journey requires the discipline and asceticism of attention and commitment. One has to experience the wonder, the terror, the awe and the immense silence that is the universe. It is this that evokes the transformation of consciousness required to act in hope in response to the ecological crisis. This transformation is really a psychic conversion;⁷ a re-framing of the human psyche to integrate and act upon a new imaginal flow of language, visuals, voices, time and space awareness that can re-contextualize all Christian (and other religious) experience, understanding and practice.

4. Mysticism is always grounded. While the classic mystic might report unusual experiences, visions, and voices, Teresa of Avila points out that it is the community of love within which one is transformed that matters. Mysticism does not take one out of the world, but grounds one more concretely in that world. This has been for Christian mystics the test of their authenticity. *The Journey of the Universe* presents the concrete world; it is the story of stars, nebulae, planets, dark and empty space, earth, cells, plants and animals, including human animals. They were concretely produced, live and die in an intricate web of interconnection and intimacy. It is a holy, mystical journey but at the same time it is an endangered journey; fulfillment is not guaranteed. It calls for human accountability based on a deep experience of intimacy and belonging.

5. A full understanding of the role of Christ, God become human, within Christian mysticism requires the fuller understanding of what it means to be human. *The Journey of the Universe* enlarges our vision of the human person; it calls for a new look at the cosmic Christ of John's Gospel. The often emphasized meaning of the term 'cosmic' as an abstract, other worldly, static and even fatalistic concept is replaced by a notion of a cosmos subject to time and development—to history. The Jesus who acts in human history is the same Jesus of cosmic history. The Divine is incarnated in matter in the fullness of its meaning. The very organic connotations of incarnation and of communion associated with the early Christian movement as well as with many experiences of mysticism bear examination in the light of *The Journey of the Universe* and its implication for Christology.

⁶ Esther DeWaal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination*. London, UK: Hodder and Stauton, 1996.

⁷ Cf. Robert Doran, *Theology and The Dialectics of History* (Toronto, Buffalo and New York: University of Toronto Press, 1990) for a comprehensive explanation of psychic conversion and its potential relationship to the ecological crisis. For a proposal of the relationship of psychic conversion to Thomas Berry's work, see Anne Marie Dalton, *A Theology for the Earth* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1999) esp. pp. 180-182.

6. Christian mysticism supports Christian praxis. In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Thomas Merton argued this point. In a quite different context, Therese of Lisieux considered herself engaged in a mission to the world even though she never left her convent confines. Mysticism is not individualism; it finds an entry point into a relationship of intimacy with the Divine but finds there the union of all reality. This was elaborated in more systematic fashion by Thomas Aquinas in his explication of the relationship of the One and the Many. God is one but is present in all the multifarious forms of the creation. It takes them all to give expression to one ultimate reality. *The Journey of the Universe* uses the latest scientific data and theories to give a concreteness to the multifarious forms and to engage the imagination in relating to these forms through the use of narrative.

The Journey of the Universe is a story with a purpose. It grounds an ecological praxis by impressing on the human consciousness the sacred mystery of creation in contemporary scientific form. We see ourselves clothed, as it were, in the fullness of the created world. The Christian theology of mysticism has to accommodate this consciousness if it is to be grounded in ecological praxis which is the compelling work of our time.