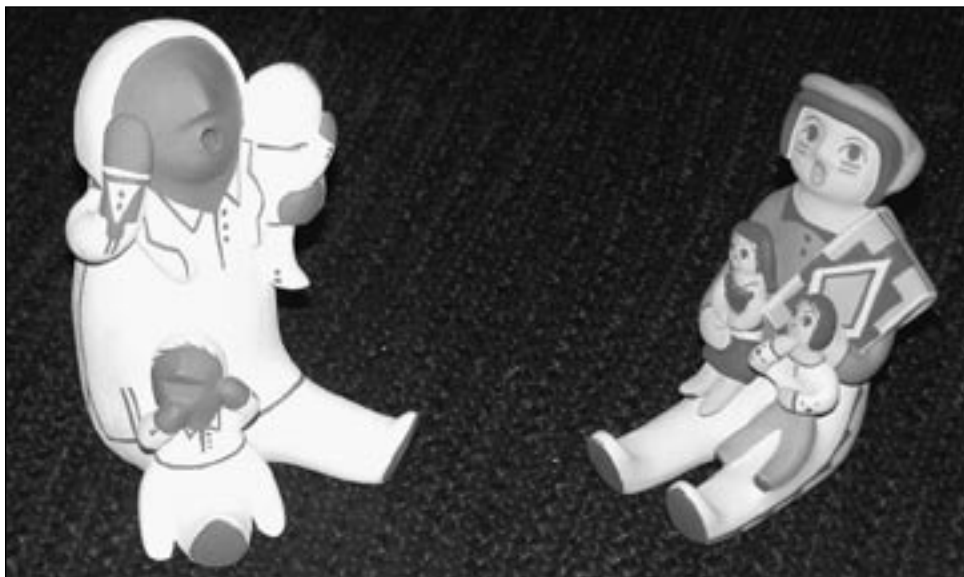


The Cosmology of Christmas

THEODORE RICHARDS

“Reflections” is an occasional section in Interreligious Insight. Pieces draw on various traditions to unfold an important theme in spirituality, philosophy, or interreligious work. We hope that readers will make their own fruitful connections for dialogue and engagement.



Story Telling: photo, Cetta Kenney

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. And learn to give them away when they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.

– Barry Lopez

We require stories because they speak directly to our need for meaning, a need as great as our need for food and water and air. Mythology does not merely explain or describe the cosmos, it invites us to participate in it. It is in this vein that the Christmas story is myth: it is an invitation to participate in a cosmic story of the birth of the divine in humanity, a birth that occurs at the darkest of times.

But stories can imprison us as much as they can empower. The stories of modern American society only reinforce the schism between literal truth and myth. As the modern West has become increasingly literate, it has also become increasingly literal.

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Fundamentalists interpret myths literally that we know could not be literally accurate, and perhaps never were intended to be; secularists reject myth as a waste of time due to its inaccuracies. And we are all left without a functional cosmology.

The uniqueness of humans is our ability to tell a story. We can learn something and pass it on from generation to generation, allowing humanity to transform itself far faster than biological evolution allows. As a result, the fate of the Earth is in our hands. For the first time, conscious choice is the primary evolutionary pressure on the planet. And so, the greatest question for the 21st century is the question of what story we will tell.

Science has a story to tell, too. Indeed, science is most useful to us when scientists recognize that they and their discoveries are a part of a story—that is, when we are able to put them in context. Cosmology, in particular, is the story of the Universe. A functional cosmology will take the scientific story of the Universe and tell it in a way that puts humanity in proper context. What follows is a return to this story, not merely as a means of satisfying an intellectual urge to know, but to fulfill a spiritual yearning to connect. It is not the story of an objectified Universe; it is our story.

In learning the story of cosmic evolution, I have encountered a memory of my early childhood. The first intellectual interest in my life was space. Even before I entered school, I begged my parents for a telescope, took classes at the planetarium. I dreamt of the stars. In this way, I cultivated awe as only a child can, as only an encounter with such immensity can. And at the same time, my most terrifying nightmares came not in the form of bogeymen waiting in my closet (although they occasionally did) but from this encounter with the immensity of the cosmos. Without any spiritual, cosmological framework in which to place my study of the Universe, I was terrified of the vastness of space like Blaise Pascal, who once wrote of this seemingly meaningless void, “I feel engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing and which know nothing off me. I am terrified.” The science I learned in school was equally bereft of meaning, and lacked even the awe-inspiring quality of my previous studies. I turned away from science, from the cosmos, to find more ‘meaningful’ fields of study, such as religion and literature.

A large part of the fear and disappointment I felt in my encounters with the cosmos was due to the Western worldview. A world of meaning based on a fragmented Universe cannot psychologically handle the immensity of the whole. The irony of the West’s scientific endeavor is that, because of the facility with which it has deconstructed, fragmented, dismembered the Universe, it now stands at the precipice of perceiving the whole. After many years away from the study of Western science, I have encountered what Brian Swimme calls, the ‘main action’ of the Universe, to remember not only my early encounters with cosmology, but to remember the holistic wisdom of our ancestors and to integrate a fragmented, dismembered world. This is not merely my own calling, but that of our species—an increasingly individualized

consciousness requires a way back to the whole, something that was not required with such urgency at less differentiated phases in evolution.

My encounter with the void was not unique. Indeed, the shamanic journey, the earliest form of religious practice we know of, involved an encounter with the void and the dismemberment of the shaman. The shaman returned from his journey only after being re-membered—and reborn—as a new being. He or she was the proto-individual, a unique person who was noticed to stand apart, much like today's artist; but the individuated consciousness of the shaman enabled him or her to enter into the collective. That is, the shaman's dismemberment in the underworld allowed for the remembrance of an essential unity.

As when I was a child, I have found the study of cosmology to be a wonderful way to cultivate awe. But awe without meaning is not enough. There must be a framework of meaning into which we integrate the new cosmology in order for it to enable us to function more authentically, that is, to live our lives in harmony with this particular phase of cosmic evolution.

How can we find universality in individuality? Humanity has scarcely begun to consider the process by which we can realize this reconciliation of this paradox with regard to our current scientific understanding. A process that looks without—to the stars—and within is required. The shamans teach us that to remember—to be 're-membered'—is to be reborn. The central practice of the Sufis is the *Zikr* – “remembrance”. Indeed, our capacity to remember is unitive, for it is a function of consciousness, the most recent evolutionary stage, but it ties us to our shared past. Only a conscious individual can remember; but our deepest memories are not individual, but of our commonality. We can understand that the unity of the cosmos by looking out to the stars and using our minds, but we can remember our essential unity only through interiority, looking within.

For Teilhard, interiority is the answer to the paradox of unity and differentiation. In an evolving Universe, with increasing complexity, we are capable of finding connection not through looking out, but by looking within. He writes:

We can progress only by uniting: this, as we have seen, is the law of Life. But unification through coercion leads only to a superficial pseudo-unity... It materializes, in short, instead of spiritualizing... Therefore it is inwardly that we must come together, and in entire freedom... [I]f the synthesis of the Spirit is to be brought about in entirety... it can only be done, in the last resort, through the meeting, center to center, of human units, such as can only be realized in universal, mutual love.

While he proposes a certain sense of “progress” that I would not—our tendency to value that which we presume to be more evolved can too easily lead to social hierarchy—Teilhard represents some of the most compelling ideas in the reconciliation of evolution and divine unity.

Meister Eckhart, like his Dominican predecessor Thomas Aquinas, developed a theology in which the human being is *capax universi*, “capable of the Universe”,

through Christ. He refers to this capacity as “God’s naked being, and this is the pure essence of Spirit.” For Eckhart, we find God, the universal, in the depths of our selves. Eckhart’s path to the divine, therefore, is an emptying process. Like the shaman in the depths of the Earth, like Jesus on the cross, like the stars exploding and bringing forth life and the decimated plains of North America after the great asteroid hit 65 million years ago, union with the divine, for Eckhart, is made possible through an experience with the void, because this unitive capacity is in the depths of our selves.

Hindus have a similar concept, the atman, or Self, which is a universal, not an individual self. As with Eckhart, there is a letting go of the superficial aspects of individual identity in order to recover a more authentic Self, a Self that is realized only through deepening relationships. At our core, at our deepest and most authentic selves, we are not merely the same, we are intimately connected.

The new story of cosmic evolution describes a Universe in which we are all at the center. We are each literally at the place where the “Big Bang” occurred. The recognition of our centrality is neither self-centered nor anthropocentric if we understand our identity in relationship, and understand our individuality as a process not of increased separation but as deepening interiority. In this way—through a deepening



The Void; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

interiority and centrality—we can reconcile the paradox of individuality and universality. The Self is Universal; through interiority, we can return to singularity.

For any society to transform itself, its basic worldview—its cosmology—must be transformed. An evolutionary cosmology is different from most religious cosmologies in that it lacks the cyclical component humans crave, comforting because it allows us to experience the eternal. But in spite of its apparent linearity, the new story of the Universe can serve as a framework for this transformation.

First, the concept of singularity through interiority can serve as a way to develop a cosmology that is both linear and cyclical. The ‘main action’ at each evolutionary phase is to reconnect to singularity—the creativity of compassion. At this phase, we can reconnect by finding God in the depths of our selves: the Hindu atman; Eckhart’s “pure essence of spirit” or divine spark; Teilhard’s interiority. In a new cosmological cycle, the beginning of the Universe would be the end: singularity.

The union of the individual and the universal, the mystical paradox, represents rebirth, resurrection, and remembrance. Our capacity to recreate our selves in this way is our greatest creative act as humans, just as the supernova is for large stars, or the formation of matter was for that lonely particle in the flaring forth.

Such creativity in the midst of catastrophe yields not only a new cosmology but a new foundation for ethical behavior based upon compassion and wisdom. If compassion is the feeling of our essential sameness, our unity, our connection, wisdom is the knowledge of it. That is, wisdom is beyond knowledge; it is knowledge in relationship. In this way, a new religious cosmology can inform the scientific. We cannot know the Universe merely through ‘objective’ knowledge; we truly know through understanding our relationship.

About twenty years after my initial experience of terror, of meaningless, which came with my study of space, I had a completely different experience of emptiness. On Christmas morning, 2000, I found myself in a small village in the tribal areas of western Pakistan, waiting for the border to Iran to open so I could pass through. I was terribly sick—some bad dates I’d eaten, perhaps—and lonely. I had not expected to miss the Christmas season, but the loneliness I was feeling from months alone on the road was exacerbated by my knowledge that it was Christmas.

Christmas is surprisingly low-key in the tribal areas of Western Pakistan.

It was dark and bitterly cold, as the desert usually is at night. The darkness, along with my sickness, contributed to my loneliness. I wandered blindly through the town to find a place to rest, and settled on a pile of burlap sacks. I lied down and looked up. Immediately I was transformed by the immensity of the stars; unlike the terror of Pascal, I felt intimate with them. In a few moments, some local men, rifles slung over their shoulders, invited me to come into their home to drink tea around a fire. The isolation I had felt as an American only made this interaction feel more powerful. They saw me simply as a human being, smiling



Rebirth; original art, Lonnie Hanson

and laughing kindly when they realized that I was from America. Moments of communion are all the more powerful and transformative when creative compassion is required in this way.

I write as the winter solstice and Christmas approach. The days have become short and cold. In northern California, the rains have started. Sunlight, abundant only a few months ago, seems scarce at times. But soon, just after the solstice, the

days will begin again to grow long. Many of the religious cosmologies of the West have celebrated the solstice as a return of the sun, the birth of the divine at the darkest hour. It is, for each of us, at the darkest hour that we must be able to find our inner light. Christmas is celebrated on December 25, the mythic date of Horus' birth, not because there is any evidence that Jesus was born on that date, but because it makes sense that the divine should come to be present among humanity at the time of our greatest feelings of fear and disconnection. In the context of the new story, the winter solstice or Christmas is the perfect time to celebrate rebirth because it serves as a moment to unify the paradox of individual and the Universal. It represents both the birth of the Universe itself and the rebirth—a recognition, really—of our own divinity, our divine spark.

The modern West, particularly America, is in a state of dismemberment. We lack such a cosmological framework, leaving us lacking an ethical foundation that guides our relationships. Increasingly, we seem to see ourselves as isolated individuals. The end product of such isolation is fear—fear of the 'other' from whom we consider ourselves separate. And out of fear, we resist authentic relationships even harder. The worldview of the West simply does not allow most of us to see our interrelatedness.

As Teilhard points out, "coercion" results only in a "superficial unity." We cannot fake it. To pretend that we are in loving, compassionate relationship to the Universe without re-imagining our fundamental worldview cannot result in true transformation. We are, however, presented with an opportunity from the latest discoveries of science and void our dismemberment has created. The Universe creates most profoundly, most unexpectedly, at such times. As the ancients observed, the sun is reborn at the darkest hour. Their fear was overcome through the wisdom that came from their sense of relationship to the cosmic process; our fear must be overcome through the wisdom of both our interiority and our deepening relationships.