Care of Creation and the Call for Christian Ecological Imagination

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Building upon her study that investigated the motivation of persons engaged in earth care ministry, Allossery-Walsh explains how the spiritual practice of the Cosmic Walk can assist Catholics in developing their ecological imagination toward taking responsibility to care for creation.

Ongoing scientific study points to the reality that the earth community today is plagued with an unprecedented and accelerating ecological conflict. Although this is more commonly described as ecological crisis, the term ecological conflict captures more accurately the current state of the earth community. To delineate this state in terms of a conflict—the struggle for survival, for respect, and for a right to exist amid the diverse beings that make up the community—is critical for encouraging an understanding of what needs to be transformed to reduce the conflict. The ecological conflict and the results of this conflict will only be reduced when space and place are provided for all members of the earth community to flourish according to their unique destiny. In this present state of ecological conflict, the human species is in a struggle with other-than-human species. Humans are also in conflict with one another over earth issues such as the use and protection of resources. Ultimately, this conflict has brought about severe deterioration of the quality of life within Earth’s community. As a result, recent Catholic

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social teaching has made an urgent plea for the development of ecological consciousness and responsibility. More than ever, there is a need to assess and reflect on the current practice of and motivation for care of creation within local faith communities so as to strategize for the deepening of such. In this article I draw on current experience from my doctoral study undertaken with Catholic lay ecclesial leaders examining the forces that motivate their ecological responsibility. The participants in the study represented four deaneries (two urban and two rural) within the Diocese of London, Canada. They are adult volunteers who lead social justice ministry in and beyond the parish setting (See Allossery-Walsh).

A Study of Motivation

Among the key findings that the study exposed was the tendency of lay leaders to live out of an ecological identity—a conscious identification with creation (earth, nature, planet). This conscious identification with creation is in a process of transformation toward greater expansion. The transformation of their consciousness is influenced by religion—elements of the Christian tradition—but not by religion alone. Other motivational forces like science do exist. Both environmental science and science in the form of new cosmology speak to them.

With this in mind then, I address the role of cosmology as a motivational force, since generally speaking it is an area that had received only minimal consideration. Based on my study, I consider how the process of cultivating an expanded ecological imagination depends upon the renewal of cosmological imagining. I believe that Catholic educators working in parish faith formation programs can benefit from awareness of the potential of cosmological imagination—the cultural practice of cosmology to inspire and motivate care of the earth. To aid this review we consider: the significance of functional cosmologies within culture; scientific cosmology; a cosmological work, *The Universe Story* by Father Thomas Berry and mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme; and finally, an example of how the new cosmology can be motivational, when presented in the format of the Cosmic Walk.

Cosmology Up Close

Historically, cosmologies have functioned to unite, orient, and motivate large communities of people in their quest for meaning. They are stories that provide an overarching context and guidance for human life and activity in relation to the wider reality (Berry 2006, 59).

The act of cosmological imagining itself is rooted in human genetic makeup such that in order to become fully human, we need to ponder the universe to discover our respective place and role as a species. Consequently, vital to human
development and maturity is the activation of this imagination in an effort to answer questions such as: Who are we? Where do we come from? and Where are we going?

Traditionally, the human practice of cosmological imagining and exploration was situated within three main streams of thought: religious, philosophical, and scientific. Cosmological quests and their resultant narratives have emerged in history largely under the influence of these three streams, sometimes through the convergence of their concepts and at other times through the individuation of such. In the last few hundred years, scientific study has produced vast insight into the life of the Universe and planet Earth. These insights have precipitated a movement (at least in western culture) toward new worldviews and paradigms of human existence. As science writer Connie Barlow states:

> We are privileged through science, to know and witness the immense and fecund journey of life on Earth. Time thus becomes history, and history sacred story. We are privileged through science to augment folk wisdom of ecosystems and to begin to learn the physiology of the whole Earth, Gaia. (Barlow, 15)

**Cosmology in Context**

The work of imagining a new cosmological narrative comes out of Berry’s and Swimme’s deep desire to respond to the phenomenon of unprecedented global suffering and to the related ecological conflict. For Swimme much of the culture, especially in the West, is acting out of a pathological mindset and so has lost sight of what he sees as the true purpose of being—to evolve into our larger role as earthlings. According to Swimme:

> [O]ur deep seated arrogance toward the non-human components of the earth community has crippled evolutionary advance. The nuclear impasse stems from our delusion that territorial ideological disputes qualify as issues for which the four-billion-year process of life can be sacrificed. The commercial-industrial impasse results from our delusion that consumer demands are reason enough to ruin any habitat, any community of life, even the conditions from which life emerges and evolves on this planet. The sickness of the present situation will continue to escalate until we learn the fuller dimensions of our role with evolution’s unfoldment. . . . It is the challenge of living within a new story, a story of cosmic and terrestrial dimensions. (Swimme 1983, 1)

The conflicts, impasse, and distress occurring for the majority of the global community are also the points of departure for Berry’s acting. According to Mary Evelyn Tucker:
Berry’s articulation of the need for a new orientation and direction was motivated by his deep concern for the almost suicidal path of humans in their destruction of the earth and in their violence and indifference to one another. The need for a New Story or a functional cosmology, then, arose not as an abstract idea, but as a response to the sufferings of humans in a universe where they saw themselves as deeply alienated. . . .

Berry interpreted the pervasive experience of alienation and despair occurring in western culture particularly, as a symptom of a culture that was tied too closely to a consumerist identity and so had become adrift without substantial moorings. Along with this faltering identity was a widespread disassociation from and indifference to classic forms of religious narratives. Together these symptoms, along with an ongoing assessment of science’s revelations and the lack of integration of such, led Berry to his overarching motivational insight regarding the need for a newly conceived cosmology—a functional framework for the orientation of human purpose and destiny. As Tucker explains:

[H]umans are in between stories. The coherence provided by the old stories [is] no longer operative, Berry asserted, proposing instead the new evolutionary story of how things came to be and where we are now as a comprehensive context for understanding how the human future can be given meaningful direction. Berry stated that to communicate values and orient human action within this new frame of reference we need to identify basic principles of the universe process itself. These, he suggested, are the primordial intentions of the universe towards differentiation, subjectivity, and communion.

The need for a new story that represented the best of scientific cosmology with the best of the humanities’ interpretive tools has led to the evolution epic created by Swimme and Berry. For the authors then their cosmology has as its primary basis the account of the emergent universe.

**A Renewed Cosmology: The Universe Story**

*Cosmology aims at articulating the story of the Universe so that humans can enter fruitfully into the web of relationships within the Universe.* (Swimme and Berry, 23)

Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have formulated a cosmology that responds to the classic existential questions and goals with tremendous imagination and insight. These authors have created a cosmology for the purpose of and in a style that gives voice to the Universe’s own life story as it is now known today through
the sciences. In their process they do not want the reader to simply read “about” facts of the history of the universe. Instead, they want the reader to hear “from” the Universe, to feel part of—one with—and transformed by this expanding reality. They intentionally avoid a cosmological narrative that acts as an objectification of the external physical universe in favor of a process that illustrates the mystery of the Universe’s subjectivity and listens for its unique being to emerge. They explain:

The Universe bloomed into existence, settled on its fundamental laws, and stabilized itself as baryons and simple nuclei. For several thousand years it expanded and cooled and then, in an instant, at the very end of the fireball, the universe transformed itself into the primordial atoms of hydrogen and helium. . . . Atoms of hydrogen and helium formed—seemingly such microcosmic events—and yet the fundamental qualities of the fireball were changed forever. Hydrogen and helium allowed light to shoot through them. The universe broke itself apart to begin an entirely new era of the macrocosmic adventure, an adventure opened up by the creativity of these first hydrogen and helium beings. (Swimme and Berry, 29)

The key goal for a renewed cosmology is ultimately to transmit the dynamic life and interiority/spirit of the Universe. From Berry’s perspective, “the reality and value of the interior subjective numinous aspect of the entire cosmic order is being appreciated as the basic condition in which the story makes any sense at all” (Berry 1988, 135). This desire to have readers recognize the depth and subjectivity of the Universe so as to be able to claim their identity and participation therein is an energy that permeates and guides the cosmological imaginings of this story.

### Participating in the Story of the Universe through the Cosmic Walk

In an effort to help individuals explore and participate in the emergent universe of the new cosmology Miriam MacGillis, a Dominican sister and cofounder of the earth literacy center Genesis Farm, created the Cosmic Walk. Her goal was to design a learning process to help others connect in a deep way to the sacred revelations of the Universe in which they shared, to which they belonged:

We’re told that the Earth is 4.6 billion years old and the elements of the Earth and of our bodies are even older than that. We’re told the Universe is 12–14 billion years old so that the stuff of which we are made is unfathomably ancient. The cells in our bodies have a direct lineage to ancient cells with a nucleus that developed
around two billion years ago. This remarkable new knowledge, as much as it 
fascinates us, seems initially to be impersonal scientific information about a vast 
cosmos and to not really matter or affect our daily comings and goings. But this 
information actually crystallizes with a great deal more, to form a coherent story 
of the unfolding and differentiation of the universe from the beginning to its 
present condition. This story challenges and informs our most basic, often un-
questioned assumptions about how things are. We need great acts of imagination, 
of intuitive perception and celebration to help us embrace the revelatory material 
being offered us. (Coelho, 2008)

MacGillis designed the walk as a way to allow those who participated to meditate 
on the history of the universe according to the revelations of the new science. Par-
ticipants walk a spiral path that represents the entire story of the unfolding and 
gradual differentiation of the Universe and the earth from beginning to the 
present.

We walk into and join the unfolding of our very being and that of the entire earth 
and ecosystems of which we are a part. By walking along the symbolically very 
long path and lighting a candle to mark a particular event we seek to identify 
with our history. The walk enables us to celebrate the noble creatures of Earth, 
both ancient and new, to identify with the earth and to grasp the depth of our 
independence and communion with the Earth and other beings as we participate 
in its unfolding out of common origins. (Coelho, 2008)

The Cosmic Walk is an integrative meditation on various levels. Participants 
participate bodily in the unfolding mystery of the universe by moving along the 
spiral and observing the stages of development over a 15-billion-year expanse. 
Also, since the stages of development are written from the perspective of contem-
porary scientific knowledge, consideration of each stage draws participants into 
a place where religious awe and scientific revelation meet. Meditation on each 
stage along the walk leads to greater intimacy and identification with the intricate 
details of the universe’s creative process. As Berry describes:

“The universe shivers with wonder in the depths of the human.” From the tiniest 
fragment of matter to the grand sweep of the galactic systems, we have a new 
clarity through our empirical modes of knowing. We are more intimate with 
every particle of the universe and with the vast design of the whole. We see it 
and hear it and commune with it as never before. Not only in its spatial exten-
sion, but in its emergent process, we are intimate with the world about us. We 
experience an identity with the entire cosmic order within our own beings. (Berry 
1988, 16)
Through an encounter with the empirical revelations of science, the walk facilitates an expanded awareness of the “oneness” that defines the universe and in so doing confirms and contributes experiential meaning to the Christian revelation of oneness in the body of Christ.

**Awakening Vocation, Interdependence, and Hope**

The Cosmic Walk has been recognized for its value as an integrative spiritual practice that can awaken and nurture ecological imagination. To understand more precisely how a sense of vocation, interdependence, and hope are nurtured, it is helpful to examine the dynamics of the walk through the lens of key elements for contemporary spirituality. We consider here how the walk confirms and promotes the elements of narrative, silence, listening, compassion, interconnectedness of beings, renewal of the divine human relationship, and inclusivity.

Engagement in the meditation of the cosmic walk first requires participants to slow down and become open to the power of story. In her work *Organic Spirituality*, Nicki Verploegen Vandergrift cites participation in and the practice of storytelling as a spiritual discipline that strengthens bonds, renews one’s sense of humility, and cultivates self-awareness (Vandergrift, 57). This practice of storytelling is a transformative process that requires reverent silence and listening. Since it is a process that often awakens and exposes vulnerabilities in self and others, a disposition of compassion is essential.

To participate in the Cosmic Walk is to attend to the magnificence of the story of the emerging universe. By giving one’s attention to this story, there is a dynamic experience of the interconnectedness of one’s being to the life of the universe and to the creating force, the mystery of God active in the process. The Cosmic Walk allows participants to discover the depths of God’s creative powers and in so doing acknowledge a share in these powers as well as a call to use their own potential responsibly for the furthering of the unfolding process. Through the Cosmic Walk we awaken to our “long panoramic history as integral parts of the evolving universe and feel within us the presence and summons of this history . . . remembering evokes the ecological self and loosens the grip of the anthropocentrism of today’s culture . . . fosters an authority to act on behalf of Earth community from which we have emerged” (Macy and Brown, 155).

Because the walk conveys a story that stands as “our universal truth” the ritual is inclusive of all persons. This inclusiveness lends itself to a deep experience of hope that from common origins can emerge a common resolve to work for justice and healing of our common home. Unlike certain rituals that are exclusive in nature and so create a sense of division and separateness, the Cosmic Walk lends itself to universal usage that can have a unifying effect where ecological needs are concerned.
Experience the Wonder of Creation

The experience of the new story of the universe through the meditative ritual of the Cosmic Walk acts as a springboard for developing a holistic vision of creation in which everyone has a place and responsibility. Through the action of walking the story of the universe, MacGillis hopes participants can experience more tangibly the miracle and wonder of creation’s unfolding. Also, the walk could enable those who participated to appreciate more fully the place of human consciousness in the grand unfolding. Here MacGillis reflects the belief of Thomas Berry as she explains, “If we continue to tell our religious stories without this new scientific understanding, then we are trivializing the religious tradition. And similarly, if the scientific community continues to tell the story of the universe only in its material terms—without this inner/psychic/spiritual dimension—then we are trivializing science. Neither one alone can awaken the vision of our children and their hopes for the future” (AtKisson).

For MacGillis participation in the walk sparks the imagination and opens up the pathway to a renewed sense of identification with the universe. She believes:

We’re beginning to realize now that the self is an expression of this deeper Earth self, and the even deeper Universe self—that there are no separations. The whole is my whole self. Psychically, the sense of unity—true unity—with the inner dimension of the universe then becomes an incredibly beautiful and enticing mystery to enter into. And in terms of our emotional life, the feelings of communion, union with the whole, or oneness are no longer just the idealistic notions of poetic insight. They are empirically founded, because we know that in our very genes we are connected to the whole. . . . Physically, it’s the same idea. When we begin to identify with the whole physical being of the planet, then we can see the necessity of enhancing and conserving the integrity of the whole natural world—because it’s the functioning of this part of the planet that makes it possible for humans even to exist. Without air, water, soil, vegetation, there’s no human life. I mean, the Earth literally is our body. (AtKisson)

The opportunity to discover human oneness with the natural world, to see the Earth as our body that sustains us, to comprehend the significance of our responsibility to care for “Earth—our body,” all these learnings contribute to the awakening of and nurturing of ecological imagination.

Appropriation of the Walk

The potential for the walk to inspire ecological imagination continues to receive confirmation from those who are making it their own across the globe: India,
South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa, Chile, Canada, and the United States. The viability of the walk as a spiritual practice and educational tool shows itself in its adaptation and appropriation in diverse contexts, each version uniquely sparking ecological imagination. Just a few examples of such adaptations and appropriations are: (1) The Cosmic Walk Tapestries: South Africa; (2) Lenten Program: Taking the Cosmic Walk, Diocese of California; (3) Outdoor Cosmic Walk: Living Water Spiritual Center, Sisters of St Joseph, Maine; (4) The Cosmic Stations: St Gabriel’s parish, Canada. To many the walk connotes the signs of the times, signs of the Spirit’s manifestation through new movements such as the environmental movement and through the practices that they inspire.

The Cosmic Walk is a practice involving deep reflection. It encourages an interiorization of the “facts” of science in ways that spark imagination, transform consciousness, and encourage healing actions on behalf of Earth. Such opportunities for interiorization are primary for formation in ecological responsibility. As Brian Swimme tells it, practices of interiorization will make the difference between long-term commitments or passing fads (Swimme 1996, 45).

Offering opportunities for the practice of the Cosmic Walk as spiritual formation toward ecological responsibility is one path to cultivating an ecological imagination that can envision new forms of human/earth relationships that are not in conflict with the ways of the universe but rather that express a peaceful coexistence with them. Spiritual formation that cultivates ecological imagination is ultimately a contribution to the Christian mission for peace, recalled by the Gospel of John 14:27: “My peace I leave. My peace I give.” As emphasized by John Paul II when speaking for the celebration of the World Peace Day in 1990:

When the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of the search for peace within society, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere are telling us: namely, that there is an order in the universe which must be respected, and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations.

Christian formation and education that include the practice of the Cosmic Walk foster consciousness of creation’s rightful order, which if respected can ultimately result in the fulfillment of the prophet’s vision: peace and well-being for the entire earth community.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The suckling child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt
or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isa 11:6-9)

References


