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## **God, the Cosmos, Faith, and Gender Relations**

Once upon a time, most people assumed that the accounts in the two creation stories in the book of Genesis (1–2:3 and 2:4–3:24) were a description of actual events that occurred in real historical time. In these scriptural accounts, God has the characteristics of a human being. From out of the void, God creates the earth, all the heavenly bodies, and every living thing on the earth. God takes clay to form the male human being, and one of his ribs to form the female. God presents the earth to them, but asks them not to eat of the tree in the center of the garden, or they will die. A talking serpent tempts the human beings with the possibility of being like God if they eat of the tree. They do, and they experience disorder: shame over their bodies, a lack of enjoyment in their work, pain in childbearing, a disordered relationship between themselves, and death. The further consequences of their decision are recorded in the next chapters: out of jealousy, Cain kills his brother, Abel, and confusion develops because people attempt to “build a tower to God” without facing their social relationships.

For centuries, this literal reading seems to have been sufficient to account for the origin of a good creation, the goodness of human beings, and of the potential to exercise free will inappropriately. Why do increasing numbers of people today reject this reading? What happened to our language? How is it that the New Science image of the cosmos influences our account of creation by God? Is patriarchal social order “the will of God”? Is faith in God, as the source of all creation, an intellectually honest possibility?

Like members of every world religion, Christians (and our Jewish ancestors) have made an account of their experience of and relation to God (or, The Other). But until quite recently, we have not been very aware of the impact of concrete, social setting upon those accounts; indeed, we did not realize that our account of the God-creation relationship was a reflection of relationships in society. The encounter of ancient Jewish culture and language with that of Greek culture and language by way of the conquests of Alexander the Great would have powerful consequences for the interpretation of the origins of creation, as well as for religious, social, and political life.

The Greeks, our philosophical ancestors, took it for granted that there existed some universal, uncontaminated essence of ideas that

was shared by all thinkers. Words, they thought, were simply the medium in which these ideas found expression. We are familiar with the pyramidal image of the world and social structures that comes to us from the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle, and that was presumed to be “the way it is.” Today, however, scholars realize that the images and metaphors by which we make sense of our lives are, in fact, influenced by our social experiences, and that those images, in turn, tend to reinforce that image of creation and the social structures that it presumes. That Greek understanding, coupled with a literal reading of the scriptures, found its way into the imaginations of Christians. In turn, that structure of the world, of social relationships, and of the Church was presumed to be the will of God! So long as the patriarchal-pyramidal image of society was not challenged, few persons questioned the literal reading of Scripture, the image of God in it, the gender roles in Church and society, or that God is the source of creation.

Matters began to change in the sixteenth century. The cosmological discoveries of Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543) and Galileo Galilei (1564–1581) shook our social structures and our language. To have publicly taught that the sun, rather than the earth, is the center of our planetary system contradicted the literal reading of the biblical account of creation. Their discoveries also questioned the controlling image of society, itself based upon a social order composed of a patriarchal ranking of beings. It is not at all surprising that, within one hundred years of their promulgation, the cosmological discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo would threaten the authority of monarchies of every sort (including that of the Church), and the language by which we had made an account of the relation of God to creation.

On our way to appreciating the relation of our social structures to our language, image of God, and our images of the whole of the cosmos, a more conscious realization of the reverse influence of cosmology upon language describing our social structures, image of God, and the meaning of “creation by God” has occurred. For Copernicus and Galileo to have discovered *empirically verifiable new truth* that had not been taught by either civil or ecclesiastical authorities would raise many uncomfortable questions: Can we be sure that there are pure ideas that are clearly expressed in our words? Can truth be controlled? If ordinary human beings can discover truth for themselves by the use of reason, is not *revealed truth* absurd? Indeed, some said that the idea of “God” is a creation of the human mind when it cannot or will not seek the truth. And besides, had not persons used religious notions of “God” to justify the persecution of others?

Initially, several philosophers and scientists called for the replacement of the metaphysics of Aristotle and “superstitious religion” by scientific method applied to knowledge of the world and to social

structures. Their cries for liberty and equality, however, were at first applied to males only. And yet, the *discovery of discovery* laid the way open to the scientific discoveries that would overturn the centuries-long assumptions that females are misbegotten males. No longer could we safely say that the truth articulated in human language is “out there,” untouched by social context.

Indeed, if the descendants of Descartes had sought to discard the metaphysics of Aristotle and the authority of the Church as articulated through Aristotelian language, they had sought to replace it with another meta (overall) explanation of reality such as mathematics. But, with the discoveries of galaxies beyond our own, and with the engagement of myriad cultures through electronic communication and global travel, philosophers, theologians, and scientists began to ask: If all language is culture bound, is any meta-explanation of reality possible? If all is in flux (Chaos Theory of the universe), what social system best respects and reflects this truth? Can we communicate about matters of ultimate importance outside of our own culture, our own “language game”?

It is from this context, in which massive challenges to metaphysics have and continue to be made, that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (each influenced by metaphysics and its patriarchy) are challenged to re-say what they hold to be true. They ask: Are these religious families mere variants of patriarchy and the language that defends it? Are their convictions of faith about God as the source of creation irretrievably tied to a literal reading of their creation stories? Can one hold to the Big Bang Theory of creation and its associated Chaos Theory and still be a believing, practicing Jew, Christian or Muslim?

The language of metaphysics, coupled with a literal reading of Scripture, could (and did) give the impression that our words actually captured reality. If we trusted that metaphysics and biblical literalism to give us ageless language by which to speak truth, and if now many of us recognize its patriarchal social roots, what are the options? If we now know, using the historical-critical method, that biblical accounts of creation are mythic literary forms that speak interpretations of reality—of its origins and our own human freedom—what are the options?

We could resort to nihilism and despair of making an account of faith altogether. Some Christians have turned to either biblical fundamentalism, papalism (“Whatever the Pope says”), or to traditionalism to provide some form of “secure truth.” And yet, if we distinguish the demands of scientific knowledge from the knowledge of the heart, there is no need to restrict our image of God as Source of All to the data of metaphysics or to a literal reading of Scripture. Indeed, the God we worship can never be captured by any set of human metaphors.

A contemporary use of Chaos Theory sees within the universe the urge to self-organization. Thus, deep within what may appear to be ran-

dom movement of particles is “the Strange Attractor” that reveals a pattern. As believing Christians, we could well say that the Chaos-Spirit of God at the heart of the cosmos is its ever surging life force, assuring that all will be well, and that disorder is not the final state of things. And inherent in Chaos is the pattern: the dying and rising with Christ, “the Strange Attractor.” In every celebration of the Eucharist, we are the disciples on the road to Emmaus, saddened because things have not turned out as we had hoped. And beginning with Moses and Miriam, our ancestors, Jesus interprets our history to us by naming the pattern of our lives. In eating the Bread we give ourselves to the Church from whom the Strange Attractor cannot be separated, and in drinking the Cup we give ourselves, yet again, to the pattern of the Strange Attractor of our lives.

For those who know the Christ Event in their bodies, scientific discoveries simply provide another set of metaphors to speak of God involved in the universe in our flesh.

#### SUGGESTED READING

Brummer, Vincent, ed. *Interpreting the Universe as Creation: A Dialogue of Science and Religion*. Studies in Philosophical Theology. Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991.

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Tilby, Angela. *God, Self and the New Cosmology*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

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