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By: Albert Nolan, OP
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CHAPTER 16

One with the Universe

Full participation in the spirituality of Jesus would have to include some experience of our oneness with the universe. Jesus' extraordinarily profound union with God manifested itself not only in his identification with all human beings, but also in his oneness with nature. Because he lived in a pre-scientific and pre-industrial age, he did not experience nature as a resource to be exploited or as a machine to be manipulated. Jesus experienced all of nature, including humans, as *God's creation*.

Nor would Jesus ever have imagined that God had created the universe in the beginning and then left it to carry on by itself. For Jesus, God was actively caring and providing for all of creation, every day. God feeds the birds, clothes the fields with flowers, lets the sun shine and the rain pour down on the just and the unjust alike (Mt 6:26-30 par: Mt 5:45 par). The whole universe is alive with divine action and creativity. Jesus' attitude to creation would have been shaped by the many beautiful creation psalms and canticles of the Hebrew Scriptures.¹ They would have been the prayers or hymns of the synagogue he grew up in. We have already noted his childlike sense of wonder at the marvels of nature.

What is of particular importance for us to notice here, though, is that Jesus saw humans as an integral part of God's creation. We are creatures alongside the birds of the air and the

lilies of the field. God cares and provides for us too. Every hair on our heads has been counted (Mt 10:30 par). Jesus does not see humans as standing above creation and observing it from outside. We are part of it, a very valuable and important part of it, but still part of it. "Do not be afraid," Jesus says, "you are of more value than many sparrows" (Mt 10:31 par; see also Mt 6:26 par). But you are cared for in the same way as sparrows are cared for.

Jesus' experience of oneness was rooted in his experience of God as his *abba*. But God was also like an *abba* or caring Creator to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, to everyone and everything. Jesus must therefore have experienced himself as a part of nature and its rhythms. He lived in perfect harmony with nature and with himself—and with God. The scripture scholar John Dominic Crossan makes this insightful observation about Jesus' inner peace: "The serenity and security passed by Jesus to his followers derives not from knowing hidden mysteries from past or present but from watching nature's rhythms of here and now."²

The Experience of the Mystics

The mystical experience of oneness with God seems to have always included an experience of oneness with nature and the universe. The classical example of this was the experience of Francis of Assisi. Nobody taught Francis to love the birds and the flowers, the rocks and the forests, the sun and the moon, and to treat them all as his brothers and sisters. His gentleness and tenderness toward all creatures, including human beings—and especially the poor and the lepers—flowed quite simply and naturally from his experience of oneness with God. He experienced himself as intimately one with all of God's creatures.

The uneducated Dominican brother Martin de Porres (1579–1639) clearly had the same experience. While his learned confreres in Lima, Peru, were engaged in study and preaching and liturgies, he fed the hungry, attended to the sick, and had a friendly relationship with the rats in the house. All these things flowed quite spontaneously from his experience of God.³

The twentieth-century Jesuit mystic and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) loved matter in all its forms and taught generations of us to do the same. He also taught us to see ourselves as part of an evolving universe.

Many people tell of peak experiences in which they suddenly became aware of themselves as blissfully one with the whole universe.⁴

The experience of oneness with other human beings would be incomplete and ineffective without an experience of oneness with the rest of the universe. We are not and could never be an isolated species. As human beings we are part of nature; we belong to the greater community of all living beings. More than that, the sun is our brother, the moon our sister, and the earth our mother. We belong to the great family of creation.

Identifying with nature and the universe as a whole is not an optional extra. For mystical spirituality it is absolutely essential. There is no way that I can discover my identity, my true self, without going out and making contact with nature in one form or another. Being part of nature is my basic identity. This needs to become something more than mere words. It needs to become an *experience*.

Many millions of people are deprived almost completely of any contact with nature—and that is a very serious deprivation. So many live in concrete jungles and urban smog, with a view of the world that excludes much of the sky and the stars, and, most of the time, blocks out even the sun and the moon. The urban poor are deprived not only of food, clothing, shelter, and dignity, but also of any real contact with nature. The challenge,

among other things, is to find our way back to the place where we belong and to help others to do the same.

Writing off this return to nature as mere sentimentality and romanticism is profoundly mistaken.

The Paradigm Shift

While our experience of oneness with the universe today will have much in common with the experiences of the past—of Jesus and the mystics—it will also be profoundly different. As we saw in our chapter on the new science, there has been a paradigm shift in our understanding of the universe. In other words, we are not talking about a few changes in our understanding of God's creatures, but a totally new perspective, a new framework within which to make sense of any of the things we see, hear, taste, smell, or touch.

The new paradigm is a *continuously evolving universe*. All things have evolved and continue to evolve from an original explosion of energy that we call the "Big Bang" that occurred thirteen to fifteen billion years ago. We have known for a long time about the development of history, the evolution of social structures and, especially from Darwin, the evolution of all living things one from another. But, as Swinburne and Berry point out, "in every instance the supposition was that the universe itself was there in some stable form."⁵ Now we know that the universe is not in any way a fixed or stable entity but an ongoing process, "an irreversible sequence of transformations."⁶ The universe is not a place. We do not live *in* the universe; we are part of the process. This is the new paradigm that has shaken the foundations of all our previous assumptions.

The new paradigm has dissolved the mechanistic view of things while making nonsense of our attempts to control and exploit nature for our petty selfish motives. Today's industrial world is simply out of touch with reality.

Jesus pre-dates all of this. He knew nothing of the mechanistic worldview and the industrial exploitation of nature. Jesus' universe was full of mystery and alive with God's creative energy. It was no mere machine or empty ticking clock. Nevertheless, the evolutionary dimension that has been revealed to us in the new paradigm was unknown to Jesus. In other words, he did not know that God's creative, everyday activity is evolutionary.

That did not prevent Jesus from enjoying a fullness of unity with all creation. But what it does for *us* is provide an unprecedented opportunity for deepening our experience of oneness with the universe and through that our oneness with God. It also provides us with an opportunity to deepen our appreciation of the glory of God manifesting itself in the grandeur and the immensity of this mysteriously unfolding universe.

I say advisedly that it provides us with an *opportunity* to do this. Science, no matter how advanced, is not the same as religious or mystical experience. Nor can science be used to "prove" the truth of mystical experience, as we said earlier. Science simply extends what we can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch, thereby extending the opportunity for much greater wonder, awe, and understanding.

Nevertheless, it would be impossible to exaggerate the magnitude of this opportunity and its possible consequences for mystical spirituality. A surprising number of the new scientists, beginning with Einstein himself, have been led by their discoveries to some form of mysticism. The philosopher Ken Wilber was so fascinated by this phenomenon of scientists speaking like mystics that he made a study of it. One of his conclusions was that all of them made a clear distinction between their science and their mysticism. They are two different human activities or experiences.⁷

At the same time an increasing number of people who are not professional scientists are also developing a mystical spirituality around the new universe story, and it seems to be something that will grow exponentially in the near future.

To explore this new opportunity further, we would do well to look at the three principles that govern the dynamics of our emerging universe: unity, diversity, and subjectivity.⁸

Unity

Nothing has demonstrated the oneness of the universe more stunningly than the discovery that all things originated in one and the same unimaginably small "singularity" (as they call it), out of which there burst forth a mighty explosion of energy—the Big Bang. Everything, but everything, has evolved out of that singularity: matter and spirit, atoms and stars, chemicals and life forms, you and me. It was Teilhard de Chardin who first pointed out that spirit or consciousness must have been present from the beginning because there is no matter without spirit of some kind.⁹

As humans we are one flesh belonging to one human family. As living beings we belong to the closely-knit family of living organisms that have evolved one from another over the last four billion years. So also, as individual entities we can trace our ancestry back to that first burst of energy. We are products of a spectacularly creative process of developing matter and spirit. We are one with the stars and everything else.

The other great manifestation of unity in the new universe story is our interconnectedness and interdependence. Scientists are now convinced that every event in the long history of this immense universe is connected to every other event. There are no isolated or separate events. Nor does any particular event, as we pointed out in chapter 4, have only one cause or even a series of causes. Every event is ultimately dependent, in one way or another, upon every other event in an unimaginably mysterious web of interdependence.

The mystery of our evolving universe is a mystery of mind-boggling unity or oneness.

Diversity

The second dynamic in the new understanding of the universe is differentiation. The universe unfolds and expands by a process of endless diversification. Atoms, molecules, and cells come together in a bewildering variety of entities and species. There have been, and still are, countless millions of plant, insect, bird, fish, and animal species. The unfolding of the universe is not blind chance. It favors an increase in diversity, ever-greater complexity, and new depths of consciousness. In that sense evolution does have an overall general direction.

Darwin's idea that species evolve by the simple mechanism of natural selection has been superseded by discoveries in microbiology and genetics that point to a far more complex process of cooperation as well as competition in the web of life.¹⁰

As Thomas Berry says, following the geneticist, Theodosius Dobzhansky, "the universe in its emergence is neither determined nor random, but creative."¹¹ In other words, the direction of the universe is not the step-by-step slavish implementation of a preconceived blueprint. That is how we humans make things. That is the way of rational intelligence—fixed and determined. That is not God's way.

What the scientific study of evolution enables us to appreciate all the better today is that the Creator is not like a human manufacturer of goods. God is more like an artist. The universe is not the implementation of a predetermined blueprint, but the magnificent ongoing result of artistic creativity. For that reason too, each of us is unique—a unique work of art. We are not mass-produced.

The scientific evidence provides us with an opportunity to experience something of God's mysterious and continuous creativity in all its variety and beauty. We see the glory of God in the grandeur of a creatively evolving universe.

Subjectivity

The third dynamic of the new universe story is subjectivity. Generally it is the psychologists, philosophers, and theologians who talk about the subject or the self, and therefore about subjectivity. Scientists talk about objects. But their study of the evolving universe has led scientists to the conclusion that what we are dealing with here is not just collections of objects but self-organizing systems. There are systems within systems, each with an organizing principle or a self of one kind or another. It is a universe of subjects and not merely of objects.

We are part of this universe not only as objects among all the other objects that make up the universe. We are subjects who participate in the subjectivity of the universe. We are persons.

This leads us to the mystery of human consciousness. Beatrice Bruteau puts it well:

We experience our own consciousness *subjectively*, as subjects, from the inside. All the other levels of organization we observed [earlier in the book] from the outside, objectively, seeing them as objects of our cognition. But in the case of our own consciousness, we do something more than and quite different from knowing it as an object for our cognition. We know it by being it.¹²

Our consciousness, and therefore our subjectivity, cannot be explained, because it is a primary datum. It cannot be explained by reference to anything more simple or primary. The mystery deepens at every turn.

A Seamless Whole

Oneness with God, with oneself, with others, and with the universe forms a seamless whole. Any attempt at union with

God while remaining alienated from other people and from nature would be pure fantasy. Likewise, an experience of closeness to nature that excludes human beings and one's own personal wholeness would be incomplete and ineffective. A genuine experience of oneness with everybody and everything, however, would include oneness with God, even if one is not fully aware of God's presence, because, as we saw in the story of the sheep and the goats, "whatever you do to the least of these you do to me"—whether we are aware of it or not.

What we are talking about here is one seamless experience of moving out of our self-centeredness and isolation into union with all that is. It is a movement from separation to oneness, from selfishness to love, from ego to God. And while much of it may sound abstract, convoluted, and far removed from the problems and concerns of everyday life, it is in practice an experience of beautiful simplicity—the simplicity we see mirrored in Jesus.

The mysterious author of the Fourth Gospel was clearly a mystic who saw that in the final analysis Jesus was the revelation of *oneness*: his oneness with the Father, the Father's oneness with him and with us, our oneness with one another and with him and with the Father (Jn 17:21-23). Paul spoke of this too, albeit in a very different way, recognizing among other things its cosmic dimensions: "... through him [Jesus] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col 1:20). "So that," he says in another place, "God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

God and the Universe

We have looked at our oneness with God, with ourselves, with other humans, and with the universe. What remains is the oneness between God and the universe.

Most theologians and spiritual writers speak about God as both transcendent and immanent. God's transcendence refers to the way in which God transcends or goes beyond the universe. God's immanence refers to the way in which God is within the universe. Transcendence, however, is often misunderstood to mean that in some mysterious way God lives in another world, a spiritual and invisible world, *outside* the universe. At the same time, God's immanence is pictured as God being present everywhere *inside* the universe. But outside and inside are spatial metaphors that are not appropriate and even misleading. There is nothing outside the universe because there is no space outside the time-space continuum of the universe. And because there is no outside, it makes little sense to speak of an inside. The result has been misunderstandings about both the transcendence and the immanence of God.

Despite God's immanence in the world, many believers have been led to imagine that God belongs to another world, a heavenly world, and is therefore far removed from everyday life. But, as we have seen, for Jesus God was very near, in our midst. Jesus may have spoken of God as our *heavenly* Father, but that did not mean that God was far away in another world. God is our intimate, loving *abba*.

Like Jesus, the prophets and the mystics did not make the mistake of assigning God to another, heavenly world. Whatever any of them might have thought about heaven, God for them was present and active in the here and now. Their aim was union with God in the here and now of this world, whatever might happen to them after death. "The day of my spiritual awakening," says the beguine mystic, Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210-1280), "was the day I saw and knew I saw all things in God and God in all things."¹³

In fact, many mystics speak so strongly and emphatically about God's oneness with the universe that they are frequently accused of *pantheism*.¹⁴ Pantheism is the belief that God is all

things. In other words, there is no difference or distinction between God and the universe. Meister Eckhart is still mistakenly thought to have been a pantheist. While there have been and still are numerous people who are pantheists, this is neither what the mystics of the past were saying nor what today's mystical writers wish to say.

Because the emphasis today is on God's immanence and God's deep involvement in everything that is happening in the world, most authors try to avoid pantheism by speaking of *pantheism*. This is the word that is used to emphasize that God is *in* all things. Pantheism has the merit of avoiding pantheism on the one hand and a God who lives outside our world on the other hand. But I am not sure that it expresses adequately enough the experience of Jesus and of the mystics. To speak of God as *in* all things is to remain with a spatial metaphor that gives the impression that God is some kind of invisible object inside each being or in the gaps between them. The experience of Jesus and the mystics seems to be that God is *one with the universe*.

This has led some writers to speak of a universal incarnation.¹⁵ In this model, God is incarnate in the whole universe and the universe is like God's body.¹⁶ God is one with the universe as a person is one with his or her body. Experiencing oneself and others and the rest of the unfolding universe as God's body manifesting and revealing God at every moment is spiritually powerful—an image to be treasured and explored.

A beautiful example of this can be found in the writings of the early medieval mystic, Hildegard of Bingen (1099–1179). She hears God saying: "I am the breeze that nurtures all things green . . . I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life."¹⁷

My concern would be to keep in mind that God is an unfathomable mystery and should not be thought of as an object of any kind at all. God can therefore be referred to or experienced only as a kind of *subject*. In this sense, God is the subject

or self of the universe. God is not an object in the universe or the sum total of all the objects that make up the universe. That would be pantheism. God can be thought of only as a subject or rather *the* subject, the universal subject, the universal Self.¹⁸

We often personify nature and the universe. We speak of Mother Nature. We say that nature heals. The mathematical physicist Brian Swimme speaks of the universe as wanting diversity, complexity, and centration. He sees the universe as creative, caring, nurturing, and never satisfied.¹⁹ That is how Jesus, the prophets, and the mystics would have spoken about God. God is not the diversity, creativity, or energy of the universe. God is the self who diversifies, creates, and energizes. God is not part of creation but the subject that creates. God is the universe as Creator. We can see the creativity in the unfolding universe, but we cannot see the Creator, in much the same way as we can see objects but we cannot see the acting subject in itself.

In this way we can appreciate God as both immanent and transcendent. God is immanently one with the universe, but at the same time, by being the subject, the Self, the Creator of the universe, God transcends all the objects that can be thought of as making up the universe. Words fail us here. God is the transcendent mystery that can never be described or named but, like all subjectivity and consciousness, can only be indicated or pointed to. In awe and wonder we contemplate the mystery of it all.

It may be thought that by this time we have moved far away from the problems and issues of daily life. But this is not so. Our experience of oneness, limited as it may be, is a powerful experience of healing, reconciliation, harmony, love, and peace. More fundamentally still, it is a gloriously *liberating* experience.