

COSMOS MERCIFIED INTO BEING

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“God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:3). With these words, God carried out the first act of mercy. From the chaos of the “formless void and darkness” came the order and beauty of Cosmos. In the words of the Muslim spiritual master Ibn al-‘Arabī, God has “mercified” the universe into being. (1)

To speak about cosmology, the cosmos and mercy is to use terms that have many meanings. In the context of this article, cosmology is the study of the origin, evolution and future of the universe. It is a study involving disciplines as diverse as physics, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy and theology and a study which once again invites a mutual interaction and dialogue between science and religion. Cosmos refers to all creation, the entire universe, every dimension of time and space (spiritual and material). It includes galaxies, stars, planets, black holes, ecosystems, animals, plants, humans, molecules and time. The macrocosm is the universe, the mesocosm is the planet, and the microcosm beings on the planet.

Mercy has multiple expressions to encompass the depth of its meaning. Scripture gives good nuances of the meaning. *Hesed* is the most used Hebrew word for mercy in the Old Testament and refers almost exclusively to the covenant love of God for the chosen people. In newer editions of the Bible, it is usually translated as “steadfast love.” Its equivalent in the New Testament is *eleos* (e.g., *Kyrie eleison* or Lord, have mercy). The Hebrew *rahamim*, with its root word *rahum* meaning womb, is womb-love in the Old Testament and is usually translated as compassion or mercy. In the New Testament, the Greek word *splagchna* would have a similar sense. In the Old Testament, *hanan* translates as grace or favour; in the New Testament, *charis* would carry the same nuance.

Cosmos Mercified into Being

Almost all ancient traditions tell a founding story of the creation of cosmos out of chaos imaged as violent waters, dire emptiness or deep darkness. There are rich examples from Aboriginal, Aztec, Babylonian, Celtic, Ceram, Chinese, Christian, Dogon, Egyptian, Greek, Hawaiian, Hindu, Inca, Inuit, Iroquois, Japanese, Jewish, Maori, Mapuche, Mayan, Navajo, Norse, Sumerian, Vodoun, Yoruba, and Zulu traditions. While these ancient creation stories such as the one found in Genesis 1 would not have had today’s scientific understanding of the universe, of Earth or of earth creatures, they certainly reflect an understanding of all creation seen and unseen, “the heavens and the earth.” They differentiate the creation of the heavens, the land and water of Earth, and humans.

The Jewish Rabbis, in interpreting Psalm 89:2 (“I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens”), concluded that “the world is built on *hesed*.”¹ A spiritual writer in this century, Cynthia Bourgeault, echoes this same understanding of the first act of mercy when she says, “Mercy is the very heartbeat of God resonant in creation; the warmth that pulses through all things as the divine Mystery flows out into created form.” (2)

If the cosmos has been mercified into being, it follows that all creation is a spiritual universe filled with God's presence and sustaining mercy. Psalm 24:1 tells us, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." The Muslim tradition interprets the wording in the Quran beautifully:

In the first Sura of the Quran, Allah begins by saying: "In the name of Allah, the all-Merciful, the ever-Merciful, Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds, the all-Merciful, the ever-Merciful." Commenting on this verse Ibn al-'Arabī affirms that, since Allah mentioned His two names the all-Merciful and the ever-Merciful (ar-Rahmān, ar-Rahīm) before and after mentioning the worlds, this certainly implies that the worlds, or the creation, emanated from His Mercy and will also conclude with His Mercy. (3)

Note the similarity between the name of Allah and the Hebrew word for mercy, *rahamim*, reflecting the common root language for Hebrew and Arabic.

Cosmos Sustained by God's Mercy

Not only is God's mercy present at the initial act of creation, but that mercy-filled presence continues over time. In her Magnificat, Mary proclaims, "God's mercy is from generation to generation" (Lk 1:50).

Karunā, a key belief in Buddhism, is translated as mercy or compassion and is an essential component of the spiritual path linked with loving kindness, wisdom, sympathetic joy and inner balance. In Buddhism, one who is on the spiritual path to complete enlightenment and to Buddhahood is called a bodhisattva. In almost all Buddhist traditions, there is a Bodhisattva of Mercy and Compassion, in more recent times, a woman known as Kwan Yin or Guanyin. Her name means "One who hears the cries of the world." She is seen as the champion of the unfortunate, the sick, the disabled, the poor, and those in trouble. Some coastal and river areas of China regard her as the protector of fishermen, sailors, and generally people who are out at sea. It is said that she had reached the final stages of her spiritual journey, but she refused to complete it because she had not yet responded to all the cries. She remains on Earth continuing this work.

In the Old Testament, one of the most gracious expressions of this ongoing presence is the frequent connection between morning and the steadfast love, compassion and mercy of God. The Book of Lamentations says with such eloquence, "The steadfast love of our God never ceases God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam 3:22-23). The psalms echo the same theme: "I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning" (Ps 59:16); "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (Ps 90:14); "Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust" (Ps 143:8); and "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night" (Ps 92:1-2).

This Old Testament metaphor is taken up in the New Testament by Zachariah in his *Benedictus*: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to

give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:78-79). Pope Francis chooses the same metaphor in his *Misericordiae Vultus*, announcing the Year of Mercy in 2016, “We will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity, and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ, asking him to pour out his mercy upon us like the morning dew, so that everyone may work together to build a brighter future” (MV #5).

Elizabeth Johnson speaks to the theology of accompaniment as one more way of showing how the cosmos is sustained by God’s mercy:

Scripture testifies that the cross did not begin the outpouring of divine mercy the world. It has been present from the beginning and endures forever. . .gracious and compassionate, God has always been acting mercifully. Saving mercy accompanies all creatures in the world’s beautiful, terrible journey through time to fulfillment. . .A theology of accompaniment holds the faith conviction that God forever companions the world with liberating, saving mercy. The living God, who in the Spirit is already in, with and for all creation, has in Jesus Christ joined the history of the world and participates in its journey as a member of the planetary community. Within this overall framework, we can interpret the cross as a particular event of divine solidarity with the suffering and death of all creatures. (4)

In the Quran, Allah says succinctly, “My mercy embraces all things” (Quran 7:156).

Cosmos Marked by Communion

Among the visionary leaders in today’s thinking about the cosmos are Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry. Both have spoken about communion as being at the heart of understanding of the cosmos. Richard Rohr notes:

For Teilhard, gravity, atomic bonding, orbits, cycles, photosynthesis, ecosystems, force fields, electromagnetic fields, sexuality, human friendship, animal instinct, and evolution all reveal an energy that is attracting all things and beings to one another, in a movement toward ever greater complexity and diversity—and yet ironically also toward unification at ever deeper levels. This energy is quite simply love under many different forms. (5)

Thomas Berry identified three basic principles of the universe process: differentiation, subjectivity, and communion. Of the third, he wrote:

The third ethical imperative of communion reminds us that the entire universe is bonded together in such a way that the presence of each individual is felt throughout the entire spatial and temporal range of the universe. This capacity for bonding of the components with each other enables the vast variety of beings to come into existence in that gorgeous profusion that we observe about us. (6)

On another occasion, Berry says, “The sacred community must now be considered the integral community of the entire universe and, more immediately, the integral community of the planet Earth.” (7)

In the context of cosmos then, communion means communion with God, with the entire human family, with Earth and with the universe itself. Pope Francis begins his second encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, with these words, “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of God’s creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth” (LS #92).

Echoing the covenant between God and all living beings in Genesis 9, Leonardo Boff describes the qualities of this communion:

Human beings must feel that they are sons and daughters of the rainbow, those who translate this divine covenant with all the beings existing and living, with new relationships of kindness, compassion, cosmic solidarity, and deep reverence for the mystery that each one bears and reveals. Only then will there be integral liberation, of the human being and of Earth, and rather than the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth there will be common celebration of the redeemed and the freed, human beings in our own house, on our good, great, and bountiful Mother Earth. (8)

As Boff’s quotation implies, one of the dynamics of communion is shared suffering and active response to suffering. For Hindus, the Sanskrit word for mercy is *daaya* which has as its root meaning “suffering in the suffering of all beings.” Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25 begins with the words, “inherit the kingdom prepared for you *from the foundation of the world,*” and confirms what this means in everyday life:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matt 25:34-36).

The Church’s restatement of the Corporal Works of Mercy – feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, etc. – loses some of the immediacy of the parable which says “I was hungry. . . I was thirsty. . . I was naked. . .” In 2016, following his *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis created a new work of mercy: care for our common home. In his message on September 1, 2016 for the World Day of Prayer for Care of Creation entitled “Show Mercy to Our Common Home,” he wrote:

As a spiritual work of mercy, care for our common home calls for a “grateful contemplation of God’s world” (*Laudato Si'*, §214) which “allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us” (§85). As a corporal work of mercy, care for our common home requires “simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” and “makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world” (§230-31). (9)

In the past decade, scientists have begun to understand that the universe is structured by galaxies connected by giant voids. They have named this vast network of galaxies and web-like strands holding them together as the cosmic web. Cosmic web – what an amazing metaphor for communion!

Cosmos as Dynamic and Unfolding

Scientists in the later decades of the twentieth century brought about an awareness that the universe is not static but dynamic and unfolding – Teilhard de Chardin named that awareness cosmogenesis, a universe in continual creation. This new insight, strengthened by the work of scientists and theologians for the past seventy years, has called all humanity to a new way of understanding the evolving universe, the evolving planet and evolving humanity. It has challenged humans to re-imagine their roles as being co-creators with the Creator God and having responsibility for caring for Earth and all created beings for whom Earth is home.

Such thinking invites new readings of passages like Psalm 104, the most mercy-filled account of creation. This psalm illustrates poignantly the fruitfulness and beauty of creation, and the ongoing act of creation: “When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (104:30). A contemplative reading of this psalm brings light and energy and hope in these times of disruption and fear.

The Gospel of John introduces us to the cosmic Christ, the one who comes in history in the person of Jesus. How differently the first verses of that Gospel are read when there is a recognition that the cosmos is the Body of God, the first incarnation. The coming of Jesus is the second incarnation. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. . . From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:1-4, 16). The *charis* word for mercy is used here translated as grace.

In Richard Rohr’s words, “As John Duns Scotus taught, ‘Christ was the first idea in the mind of God,’ and then Teilhard de Chardin filled out the cosmic schema by calling Christ the final ‘Omega Point’ for all of history! We were supposed to live safely between this cosmic Alpha and Omega, with history moving forward with clear meaning and direction.” (10)

Just as the first chapter of the first book of the Bible tells the story of creation mercified into being, so, too, the last chapters of the last book of the Bible tell the story of ongoing creation mercified:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God’s peoples, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev 21:1-5).

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis echoes this sense of ongoing creation, “God’s divine presence, which ensures the subsistence and growth of each being, ‘continues the work of creation.’ The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge: ‘Nature is nothing other than a certain kind of art, namely God’s art, impressed upon things, whereby those things are moved to a determinate end’” (LS §80).

Cosmos in Mystery and Wonder

Since its origin almost fourteen billion years ago, the cosmos has unfurled in a story of majesty and wonder and mystery. The mysteries continue: how the cosmos began, how it will end, the cause of the cosmic expansion, how galaxies are formed, formation of mega-stars, existence of massive black holes, dark matter and energy, life outside Earth. Among these great mysteries are how and when humans will allow a sense of the divine and the sacred back into contemporary understanding of the cosmos, how and when humans will understand and accept that the universe has been mercified into being.

In describing the work of Thomas Berry, Mary Evelyn Tucker writes:

We dwell in a sacred universe, we are part of a vast evolving process, we are returning to a sense of kinship with all beings. . . He [Berry] calls for an awakening of wonder, so that along with such new strategies as sustainable agriculture, ecological economics, green politics, and eco-design there will also be an emerging sensibility in human consciousness that will have the enduring energy for the great transition ahead. This is Berry’s fondest hope – that the dynamizing sources of human energy will be found in a broadened religious and spiritual sensibility. This comprehensive sensibility includes a revitalization of the world’s religions and a robust dialogue among and between civilizations. (11)

The weaving of many faith traditions within this article shows how the dialogue among world religions about a theme as simple as cosmos and mercy is not only possible but enriching and energizing in humanity’s move towards “a broadened religious and spiritual sensibility.” The search for the spiritual impulse or presence that permeates the universe is as important as the search for the answers to the physical questions posed above. Science and religion, each with its own questions and its own wisdom, will strengthen each other’s quest if they share the journey and, in that sharing, model a way for all humans to enter the dialogue.

The following interpretation of the creation Psalm 104 illustrates well the wonder and the wisdom of interweaving ancient scriptures and distinct indigenous cultures. It comes from Aotearoa (New Zealand), and the words are a weaving of Maori and English languages.

Psalm 104: A Psalm for Aotearoa

Bless the Lord, my soul.
Kororia ki te Atua!
You are wrapped in light,
in a korowai of glory.
You made Rangi, Father Sky,
infinite space stretched out above us.
You made Papatuanuku,
Mother Earth,
resting strong beneath us.
At you command Tangaroa rose and fell;
the seas once covered the mountains of this land
but now tides swirl around us,
drawn by Marama, the moon, in her monthly dance.
Each day the sun, Ra, walks his path through the sky.
Rain falls, springs gush up out of the earth,
nga awa, rivers flow through our islands,
water for bush and bird and cattle.
I nga ra o mua, before Maori and Pakeha,
great forests ruled this land, Tane Mahuta: totara, rimu,
filled with birds from the smallest fantail to the giant eagle,
from the shy kiwi to the long-legged moa.
The sea was filled with life: whale, kahawai.

Aotearoa, cloaked with cloud, shaped by water and wind.
Nga hau e wha, winds from four directions,
brought people to these islands
and you made them a home here,
fed them from your abundance;
though sometimes you hid your face and the people were sad.
When you take away the breath of life your creatures die
and return to the dust. Aue, aue!
Haere, haere, haere ...
we mourn the loss of so many creatures, so much beauty.

Send forth your Spirit again on Aotearoa,
Haere mai, Wairua Tapu, renew the face of this whenua,
care for this land,
re-make us who call this our home, nga iwi o te motu.
May the glory of the Lord shine forever!
Kororia ki te Atua! (12)

Notes

1. Jordan Denari, "The Year of Mercy is a time to learn about Islam," *National Catholic Reporter* (December 8, 2015).
2. Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001): 31.
3. Mohamed Haj Yousef, "Ibn al-'Arabī: The Treasury of Absolute Mercy," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 48 (2010), accessed online at <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/treasury-of-absolute-mercy.html#note-1>.
4. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), xiii.
5. Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (Convergent Books: 2019): 69-70.
6. Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009): 121.
7. Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009): 133.
8. Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997): 114.
9. Pope Francis, "Show Mercy to our Common Home," *Message for the World Day of Prayer for Care of Creation*, 01 September 2016, accessed at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html.
10. Richard Rohr, "One Sacred World," *Daily Meditations*, Center for Contemplation, Thursday, March 26, 2015, accessed at <https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/2015/03/>.
11. Mary Evelyn Tucker. "Forward," in Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth*, xv.
12. Silvia Purdie, "Psalm 104: A Psalm for Aotearoa," *Resources for Life and Faith*, 2015, accessed at www.conversations.net.nz.