

The Goodness of Creation - 4

Spirituality of the Soil

Mathew Koshy Punnackadu

The soil may appear as a relatively inert material on which we walk, build roads, construct buildings, and grow plants. On closer observation, the Soil is full of life. All life on earth is dependent on soil for sustenance. The word life itself exists because of soil, and there won't be any life without soil. Over 10,000 edible species of plants acquire their minerals (nutrients) and water from the soil, and Animals, in turn, acquire their nutrients from plants. These provide humans with the minerals, vitamins, and proteins needed to live. It is often said that a handful of soil has more living organisms than people on Earth. Soil is the earth's stomach - consuming, digesting, and cycling nutrients and organisms.

The soil is alive and intelligent. Any dead material left on the soil begins to rot. It is surprising how the dead body is

The spirituality of the soil is a way of understanding and relating to the soil as a sacred and living entity that sustains and nourishes all life. It involves recognizing the spiritual significance of soil, such as how soil is linked to creation, fertility, resurrection, and renewal. It also involves caring for the soil as a moral duty and expressing gratitude to God and nature.

managed when buried inside the soil. The soil digests the dead material and becomes part of the soil. The soil knows what to do when a seed is buried in the ground. It helps the seed to sprout and supports it. The soil treats everything that comes from the soil properly. The soil follows a rhythm in giving life to the plants. But the soil doesn't know how to deal with the plastic, poisons etc. that we have created. They disrupt the rhythm of the soil. God created everything in His rhythm. He took six days for creation. Seventh-day - rest. There is a rhythm in creation. Anthropocentric activities disturbed the rhythm of God. The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: "Speak



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to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land I

am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year, there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land" (Leviticus 25:1-5). Observe nature to study the rhythm of God. In order to understand the rhythm of nature, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness (a wild and uncultivated region, as of forest). As Jesus studied the rhythm of Nature, Jesus could resist the

temptation of Satan. When the seed finds fertile land having water, it sprouts. When the rhythm of air, water, micro-organisms, and weather blend, it produces grains. Ripe grains are harvested, ground, and made into a powder to make bread. The seed's journey to bread is through a different process with a rhythm. Hence, during the first temptation, Jesus resisted it and was not ready to disturb nature's rhythm.

The soil always holds a blanket of Grass to escape from the heat of the sunlight. The grass is a beautiful creation of God with an intrinsic value and purpose. Where there is soil, it grows. In the absence of grass, sunlight falls directly on the soil, which results in the evaporation of the moisture in the soil. When the moisture disappears, the micro-organisms will die, and the land will become unfertile,

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A Theological-Aesthetic Reflection

Icon Turned Iconographer : Image of God and Human Creativity

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the true from the false, the good from the bad, and the beautiful from the ugly in human creativity is a necessary task laid on theology. Here I do not primarily mean systematic academic theology of the institutional church as taught in seminaries and theological schools, but God's Economy (*Oikonomia*) of infinite love, compassion and forgiveness to human beings through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God.

Thus taking it in this sense, God created Adam and Eve to be in communion with God, to reflect God's glory in the whole creation, and help the created order to participate in the glory, grace and love of God. This was the paradise experience. Adam, the Icon of God, the first human being, was given the responsibility and privilege to take care of the garden. **That means Adam, or the human species, was entrusted with the care for all creation.**

So in dealing with God's creation Adam and Eve, as icon par excellence of the Creator God, and as iconographer - artists have to assume the divine qualities of compassionate love, and creative enhancement of all forms of life. Apparently God has not set any limit for the human icon's iconographic imagination or creativity and activity. The very first commission of God for Adam to freely name all creatures in the garden of Eden shows the amazingly absolute degree of trust the original Artist-Creator put

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in the unique human Icon. (*'Whatever Adam called every living creature, that was its name'*, Genesis 2:19-20). This exercise of freedom and creativity in naming everything in the Garden still continues in the complex process of creative human imagination, invention and interaction with reality. This is what we call creative holistic iconography. Its dimensions are virtually infinite since it is called to participate in God's own creativity.

Beauty in Interconnectedness

In fact, the descendants of Adam and Eve have to keep the same divine criteria for judging all that is created by human beings, from the construction of a simple hut to sophisticated architecture, from using a stick as a tool to pluck fruits to the creation of nuclear missiles, from shepherding the people to making a massive army and weaponry. **Some basic questions need to be raised with regard to every creative act. Does it help life or destroy it? Does it promote justice and peace for all people? Does it foster the harmony between humans and their environment? Does it contribute to the common good?** What is true and good for all human beings as well as for all living beings and the environment of life is to be considered beautiful.

Searching for beauty in isolated entities has no real meaning; it is to be recognised in the interconnectedness of all things. **Only a true artist-iconographer can perceive and create abiding beauty in such a holistic manner.** We may remember that at the deepest levels of particles or pulsations that constitute our material universe, truth and beauty emerge from their mutual connections and not from so-called individual particles that are really non-existent without connections.

Human Enhancement

One may think of an example like the Human Enhancement projects in order to clarify what we said regarding the holistic nature of beauty and goodness. We are familiar with very useful modern forms of enhancing human bio-physical abilities like organ transplantation, chip implants and other augmenting devices. Technology is aiming at narrowing down mind-machine interface, genetic screening, elimination of all potential diseases already at the embryonic level, and creating cyborgs that will merge intelligent self-learning machines with living organisms. The overall goal of such Enhancement programmes is to create super humans who will live probably 150 or even more years. Death is to be finally eliminated. A

simple question is about the environment of such super human or post-human species. Can we also enhance our natural environment, prevent the phenomenon of death and decay in nature? Are we humans an isolatable species of beings?

Limits of Human Creativity

In fact, the only limiting condition for our power of holistic cosmic iconography might be the quite likely impending geological-ecological cataclysm. Every major religion on earth has a picture of the final end of all life, apart from the individual human death. Even a virus, a little more fatal than Corona, can usher in the dooms day. There is no reason why the Homo sapiens cannot be totally extinct like many other extinct species on earth. There is dramatic increase in references to the scenario of total human extinction in contemporary literature compared to the first part of 20th century.

Conclusion

At this stage of radical transition we are unable to answer complex ethical, spiritual and aesthetic questions that might arise in our minds. One may, however, draw some tentative conclusions:

*** The human person as Icon of God, individually and collectively, is endowed with freedom and creativity, and is**

called and authorised to be iconographer - artist to name and rename, shape and reshape, configure and reconfigure" the world that God so loved" in such a way that it always gets the ever refreshing sense of orientation and meaning.

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* Although the human icon is capable of infinite creativity, there are, however, limiting conditions like finite space and time, huge natural catastrophes and viral pandemics that may threaten the very human existence on earth, and in our digital age, malware viruses that may instantly explode the cyber bubble and reduce human technological civilization to square one.

*** We need to exercise aesthetic discernment in the realm of our cosmic iconography, developing ways and means to judge our work of art, that is, all that human creativity produces. The transcendent roots of the human Icon and its spiritual qualities that motivate our 'iconographical' work alone can help us make the right judgment on all human creativity, from the art of painting to the creation of a post-human species.**

Science and Faith

Graeme C. Woodbrook

I recently watched a 2007 debate between Darwinist and atheist Professor Richard Dawkins, and Dr. John Lennox, the internationally renowned speaker on the interface between science, philosophy, and religion. The topic of this debate was Dawkins' book "The God Delusion", and as I am preparing a lecture on the headline topic above for my church, I couldn't help but notice several challenges to the arguments of both parties in tackling this subject.

Dawkins, has a tendency to move between religion, as inclusive of all major religions, Christianity as a specific branch, and faith as the belief system in each. Similarly, as he discusses evolution as the backbone of his atheistic belief, and Charles Darwin as having provided the scientific 'proof' to the lie of the existence of a Creator God, he chooses to omit critical facts. For example, Darwin never attempted to address how life began, only how changes occur over time in any given species. By emphasizing the facts that Darwin's excellent research does demonstrate, Dawkins tries to infer that which Darwin never undertook, i.e., the origin of life! In fact, Darwin was troubled by several aspects of his research as explored in Dr. Stephen C. Meyer's book, "Darwin's Doubt". Mr. Dawkins seems quite adept

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in using such a device when addressing any number of topics, and while Dr. Lennox is obviously a skilled debater with a broad range of knowledge, I feel he is not as strong on a variety of scientific topics as is Dr. Stephen Meyer. Perhaps this is why Mr. Dawkins refused to debate Dr. Meyer on Meyer's book, "The Signature in the Cell". He chose instead to deride Meyer and his knowledge; another device Mr. Dawkins seems to use both in his writing as well as during his debates.

Dr. Lennox on the other hand, while successfully countering Dawkins' hypothesis, had to deal with the difficulty Christians face in addressing both the historical tragedies attributable to the distorted practices of some, as well as the assertion by some creationist groups that the earth is only 6000 years old! If we do not set aside The Crusades, the Inquisition, and the burning of witches, for example, as the actions of persons and groups having nothing to do with the Christianity that Christ taught us, then we are setting a trap for ourselves that creates unnecessary complication that is unsupported by any real



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understanding of Christianity. Using such examples to decry Christianity demonstrates a lack of real understanding of the Christian faith and the way we are commanded to practise.

Faith does not need science to affirm it, just as science needs no validation by faith. Science stands alone based on rational thought, investigation, and proof. That the Universe is intelligible, and that we humans have the ability and the

intelligence to understand investigation of the micro and macro-Universe within which we exist, demonstrates again that God gave us such abilities as self-awareness, curiosity, and intelligence to aid in our better understanding of Him. I covered this, I hope quite extensively, in my earlier article "The Science of God". Today's science, not the materialistic version of science, increasingly points to the inescapable conclusion that the intricate construct of our natural world as well as the finite values of the forces of physics which, if altered even minutely, would make the existence of the Universe impossible. All this makes the idea of everything being a product of happenstance nothing short of ludicrous.

While faith does not need science to affirm it, nonetheless science is increasingly becoming a valuable resource in helping those without faith to question the very foundation of their unbelief. Without getting too deeply into the detailed world of physics, biology, cosmology, chemistry, and other disciplines I believe we can, nonetheless, share excellent illustrations as to why neither the Universe, nor life

itself is possible without the hand of an intelligent designer; the cause that exists outside the creation event. You cannot violate the fundamental principle of the impossibility of creating something out of nothing! Science has been unable to explain the origin of the Universe, and it is disingenuous of Mr. Dawkins to suggest that "perhaps one day there will come along a Charles Darwin of cosmology." Such a statement would seem to suggest, at the most basic level, that Dawkins can only denounce the most probable answer for our existence as he misquotes Darwin as the source of the only rational explanation.

As I have previously stated, the Christian faith and those who lead it must do a better job of incorporating and affirming what scripture so elegantly demonstrates of an omnipotent God's creation, and how science is increasingly proving that the Universe and all that is in it cannot be the product of a series of undirected events. At the most fundamental level, the age of the Universe and of our Earth provides insufficient time for the evolutionary story to be possible.

Evolution is a reality, and it also compatible with Scripture, but it is not the fundamental source and basis upon which we as rational beings exist.

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>>> **Contd. from Page 4 Col. 5** resulting in desertification. Hence, to avoid desertification, the grass sprouts where there is bareland. As grass absorbs the sun's radiation for photosynthesis, the sun's heat is not transferred to the soil. This is a farsighted, beautiful plan of God. Without knowing the essence of the creation, humans remove grass from the land and keep it 'neat and clean'.

We can understand and feel the voice of the land when we walk on the land barefoot. When the feet touch the ground, we contact all the creation. Walking barefoot, we do not step on any creatures we see on the land. We may have trampled them disrespectfully while walking with shoes. **Only when we walk barefoot, we do realise we are a part of this soil.** Man is the only creature in nature that uses artificial footwear, which acts as an insulator to avoid direct contact with the soil. We look at the soil with disdain when we walk in sandals and are careful not to smear the soil on our bodies or clothes.

There is a mud treatment in naturopathy. Some diseases can be cured if the whole body is

All those on this earth are our sisters and brothers. They eat products of the earth and return to the soil. Francis of Assisi said, "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs".

covered with mud for a few hours. What treatment did Naaman receive when he went to Elisha for healing? In 2 Kings 5:1-19, Elisha told Naaman, "Go and wash in the Jordan River seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you, and you shall be clean." When Naaman was wholly immersed in the water from the earth, the disease was cured. How did Jesus heal the blind man? He spits on the ground, makes a paste with mud and saliva, and puts it on the man's eyes (John 9:6). Unpolluted soil and water can heal diseases as the soil has the curative power. Water, air, and soil are gifts of God. In creation, they were pure. However, humans poisoned them. Hence, they became sick, and their power to heal diminished.

Jehovah told Moses to remove the chappals from his feet. Taking off one's shoes signifies reverence, humility, and respect. This same experience was repeated in Joshua 5:15. In

Exodus 3:5, "...take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." There are many interpretations for this. From an eco-theological perspective, we connect with the whole creation on earth by standing barefoot. By this, acknowledging that the whole creation is interdependent or interconnected through the soil medium. Hence Earth is holy and should be respected. **Soil does not live for the soil itself but for others, i.e. all in nature. This is the spirituality of the soil.**

Those who eat agricultural crops coming from healthy soil are healthy. The plants coming from healthy soil have curative power. But unfortunately, we have polluted the soil, water, and air. Because Jesus' environment was not threatened, he did not specifically ask followers to appreciate and care for the earth. Today, however, things like overuse of fertilizers, superfund waste sites, land-fills, mining, deforestation, damaged

farmland. Extinctions of plant species violate the respect for, and care of the land God gave us and all creation. People sometimes forget that items like plastic bottles contribute to land abuse. Many plastic bottles end up as garbage. Plastic bottles take some 1,000 years to biodegrade. Another source of blight on God's sacred land is the mining and production of coal, oil, and gas. Damage from these fossil fuels threatens all life forces: soil, air, water, and climate. Today's high-yield crops use tremendous amounts of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Overuse of fertilizers — especially nitrogen — damages the soil; its run-off leads to algae blooms and dead zones in the water. Producing one type of crop year after year deprives the soil of nutrients and organic matter. This results in a loss of soil structure and fertility. Crop rotation is a far better way to nurture the soil. Agribusiness also requires the use of

insecticides and herbicides. These can be dangerous and can lead to insects developing resistance. Now some companies change or add genes, even from different species, in laboratories. When seeds or pollen from these Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) migrate, they can spread their genes to native species and harm native, beneficial insects.

All those on this earth are our sisters and brothers. They eat products of the earth and return to the soil. Francis of Assisi said, "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs". The spirituality of the soil is a way of understanding and relating to the soil as a sacred and living entity that sustains and nourishes all life. It involves recognizing the spiritual significance of soil, such as how soil is linked to creation, fertility, resurrection, and renewal. It also involves caring for the soil as a moral duty and expressing gratitude to God and nature.