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Our God Is Too Small

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Three or four years ago, at the eight o'clock service in our parish church, I wrote these words on the service leaflet: "A flat-earth liturgy." It was a matter-of-fact observation; it was not bitter or accusatory, but simply an expression of a vague uneasiness with the setting, the language, the gestures of our re-enactment of the Last Supper shared by Jesus and his disciples. I felt that our liturgical tradition is still deeply tied to the medieval, pre-Copernican construct of a three-layer universe: a flat earth suspended between a heaven above and a hell beneath. I want to contrast as sharply as I can this medieval vision of the cosmos in which our liturgical tradition was formed with our vision of that cosmos today. That vision has expanded to a size only the most highly trained mind can grasp.

Think of our solar system. Pluto is a recently designated dwarf planet by the International Astronomical Union. Light travels 186,000 miles per second and reaches the earth from the sun in eight-and-a-half minutes. From Pluto, light takes ten-and-a-half hours to reach the earth. If you reduce each of the solar systems of our galaxy to the size of a quarter, the Milky Way Galaxy — of which our solar system is a part — would cover all of North America including Canada, and each quarter would be one mile apart. Another illustration of the size of the universe: The Hubble Telescope is our most powerful lens on the heavens; each photograph it takes covers only a small area of the sky. If you hold a dime up to the sky at arm's length, the thin edge of the dime (less than one-eighth of an inch) squared gives you an idea of the area of the sky visible through the lens of the Hubble. Expose a film of that size to the dimmest area of the Big Dipper for twenty-seven hours. Blow up that one-eighth of an inch photograph to a six-foot-square print and you would see approximately 3,200 galaxies in the photograph, each galaxy containing two to three hundred million stars.

So much for the scale of the cosmos. What kind of direction does this give in fashioning an appropriate image of God? It says to me that our God is too small, the God of the three layer universe. Given that three layer cosmology, the trinitarian formulation — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — emerges as the best description the Church could reach to account for the person of Christ and his pivotal role in human salvation. Is it time for a new formulation?

Questions of ultimate truth have been a part of my thinking for many years. I have a vivid and persistent recollection of an experience when I was about nine years old. I had just read an article in the Sunday *Chicago Tribune* about the grinding of the mirror for the two-hundred-inch telescope to be installed on Palomar Mountain in Southern California. I was facing our house from across the street, looking into the sky beyond. I asked myself, "If there were nothing — no earth, no sky, no sun, no moon, no stars — if there were nothing, where would that nothing be?" That kind of questioning persists, and has led me to seek a new expression of the reality of God. Some astute searcher for truth has left us a poetic and cautionary observation: "The larger the

island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.” The expansion of our knowledge deepens the dimensions of our wonder.

My basic conviction about life is this: The cosmos is a self-conscious entity, and that self-consciousness is what we call “God.” That is to say, the cosmos has a mind, an experience, a history, a heart — all that we mean when we speak of awareness: observation, evaluation, decision. All that self-consciousness is fundamental to the largest reality we can conceive, and to which we give the name God. The cosmos is not random, mindless, pointless. The cosmos is characterized by all that we mean by verbs like “experience,” “ponder,” “evaluate,” “decide,” “act,” “love.” The cosmos is a conscious entity, and to that consciousness we give the name “God.” Seen through the prism of consciousness, I want to say four things about God.

The first activity of consciousness is creation. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” There is something essential about “other.” I believe consciousness cannot exist in total isolation, hence the first action of God is creating what is other than God. I also believe a kind of instinctive awareness of this limitation underlies the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, in which we discern three realities in one God. Consciousness cannot exist in total isolation.

This leads directly to the second thing I want to say about consciousness: The first awakening of consciousness in us is the experience of other. In the encounter with other lies our first awareness of self. It is no accident that the Genesis narrative is so explicit about this: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.” Two different forms of humanity, male and female. Hence, as generations unfold, a virtual infinity of personhoods, of others, in which our awareness of self is born. The presence of other awakens to the awareness of self. The first activity of consciousness is creation; the first awakening of consciousness is other.

Third: The highest experience of consciousness is freedom: the awareness of choice, decision; the availability of alternate behaviors; the awareness of a range of responses and initiatives, of novelty, innovation, surprise.

Fourth: The highest exercise of consciousness is love. Love: the affirmation of other, the respect of other, the forgiveness of other, the service of other. This is consciousness at its highest and best. Under God’s guiding hand, the material world evolved to produce consciousness, and to open consciousness to God’s presence and to the opportunity of love.

All that being said, our task is not to understand God but to honor him. Jesus did not say to his disciples, “Understand me.” He said, “Follow me.” In responding to that command, the Westminster Catechism gives us impeccable guidance. The catechism asks the question, “What is the chief end of man?” And it answers, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

I leave you with that happy task. Amen.



Edward and Elizabeth Sims have lived their twenty-three years of retirement in the village of Rockport, Massachusetts, enjoying the beauty of the rugged shore and the nearby presence of family.