

"A Journey of Spiritual Dialogue," American Teilhard Society, Union Theological Seminary, New York, April 21st, 2012.

Erin Lothes Biviano, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Theology, College of Saint Elizabeth

I begin with thanks to Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim for this film, "Journey of the Universe," and this book of poetry and contemplation!

As I watched the film, it seemed to me I was hearing joyful reminiscences of our family tree. The film offers a gift of insight into true communion, conveyed with astonishing poetry. Some may be familiar with the motto of the Deaconess Hospital in Boston, "where science and kindness unite." Here in this vision, science and the kindest of kin-insight unite, transforming understanding into wonder and recognition.

I learned on page 42 of the book, that

The process giving rise to our Moon began when a large planetesimal the size of Mars collided with Earth, plowing right through the surface in the most violent encounter Earth has ever experienced . . . As we view the Moon in the night sky we see it now as an ancient offspring of Earth, radiant with light reflected from the Sun, floating through an ocean of shimmering darkness.

This made me just grin. It seemed so right. The moon is my cousin, another child of the Earth!

So in this retelling of stories I would like to speak very briefly to how elemental particles of traditional faith stories are also getting bigger, how their boundaries are expanding.

Let me start with a story of my son, my own not ancient but six-year-old offspring. But perhaps he is appropriately understood as a life force colliding with my own in one of the most "transforming" encounters I've ever had. One night at bedtime he asked me,

"Mom, is there an end to the universe?" He knew the answer. He was getting at something else. I replied, "No, the universe is getting bigger."

"So what's on the other side?" I said, "There is no other side!" He pursued this--

*“What if God is tricking us?” For my six year old, the essence of fun and insight and power is trickiness! “What if there is an end?”
“So what’s on the other side?” I asked him. He suggested, “Storyland.”*

Perhaps, this is similar to a koan expressed by the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, who taught that the boundary between God and humanity is a boundary that exists only on our side. The New Story is permeating our consciousness, and maybe only dimly in many parts. But the traditional stories are, in many quarters, getting bigger.

I’ve interviewed faith-based environmentalists from many traditions, who reinterpreted doctrines to apply not only to personal, spiritual experiences, understood as the concern of the individual soul, but as beliefs with planetary implications.

For example, an evangelical Christian minister found that his understanding of God’s sphere of concern expanded. Always all-powerful and supreme, God’s action expanded to include the land.

Your last question is how your view changed. That was a fascinating question because I think my God has gotten bigger since I’ve embraced this effort. Even just thinking, in 2 Chronicles 14, if my people will hear my voice and turn from their wicked ways, and call upon the Lord, I will heal their land. What does that mean? You know, could that be an environmental answer that revival could bring about the cleansing of the land. It’s land, it’s not just people. I’ve read that verse for 30 years and I’ve never seen that verse that way. And so my view of God is getting much bigger since I’ve started thinking about the stewardship aspect of this environmental concern.

Q. I am assuming God was almighty before you...well how much bigger can he get?

Ted: Well, He was almighty, He’s pretty consistent. I’m the inconsistent factor!

A young Baptist man started to rethink redemption anew. Instead of being good enough and worthy of Christ’s sacrifice, he began “to think of being brought into the wholeness that God has for me . . . God’s interest is for me to be a whole integrated person. And I think that kind of

directs my environmental perspective as well, that the earth was meant to be an integrated system of life and it's all a cycle.

Within such expanding religious visions, people, plants, and even rocks are kin.

Roshan: (Unitarian, raised Hindu): I think when I was growing up I treated inanimate things differently from animate things. And I don't now. I think that that definition has enlarged for me. It isn't just human beings don't have any special privilege on this earth, that was okay, that's how I grew up. But I don't now regard the inanimate piece as to be left out, that is part of the totality of my cosmology.

The boundaries of their stories are expanding, and blending with other ancient faith interpretations. There is interreligious cross-fertilization, expansion and re-patterning.

A woman who was raised Catholic and is now Presbyterian said,

The God that I believe in is with us here and I'm connected to it. And that means the place that I'm in as well. I'm not Buddhist, but I think my connection to the environment is sort of Buddhist-like with the Incarnation added.

A member of the DC Muslims said, “*Wisdom is the lost riding beast of the Muslim, so that wherever you find wisdom, you can use it.*”

Participants are consciously aware of the adaptations they are forging. For a Navajo artist, re-interpreting traditional symbols creates bridges back to the land of his people. New symbols are critical for the young people living both on and off the reservation, whose relationship to the land is as altered by modernity as is the landscape itself. He reflected that,

In some sense, we always have to be ready to re-arm ourselves with the prayers and chants, and the stories, and the strength of the hero twins. So in this case, the young people today, have the legacy of re-arming themselves to fight the latter-day Ye'is, the monsters, in the form of drag lines and things eating the earth.

So in looking for a religious image to express this, I have concluded that their testimonies offer a pragmatic pneumatology. That is, in addition to a patterning-dance perhaps akin to the

Christomorphic vision of Teilhard, these stories blow bigger with the breath of the Spirit, a mobile, expansive spirit.

In classic Biblical theology the Spirit moves, indwells, and renews creation.

The Spirit moves with ancient cosmic energy. She indwells, as do the very atoms of stardust.

And the Spirit renews creation and all living, inspiring the healing of the earth and the celebration of its beauty. It is an every richer patterning of song, and glory be to the mystery that invites us to the singing.