

## ***Church: Old and New***

*Blog posts by Father Richard Rohr of the Center of Action and Contemplation*

### **Diversity and Communion**

Monday, October 21, 2019

God is clearly more comfortable with diversity than we are, and God's final goal and objective are much simpler. God and the entire cosmos are about two things: *differentiation* (people and things becoming themselves) and *communion* (living in supportive coexistence). Physicists and biologists seem to know this better than theologians and clergy.

The arguments of homophobic or anti-gay folks might seem well-supported, but their goals and objectives seem to be different from those of God or Jesus. Their arguments generally have to do with very secular concerns: control over chaos, majority rule, fear of the other, fear of the unknown, and idealization of a family unit that Jesus himself neither lived nor idealized. Check the Gospels if you don't believe me.

However, I do realize that we are dealing with incredibly deep archetypes, those electric sexual images that motivate us at the most intimate levels of our being. Such "totems and taboos" have a deep hold on every culture and every individual, but they do change over time. We have learned so much over the last thirty years about the biological and psychological complexity of sexual orientation and desire, as well as gender constructs. National Geographic, which is no light-weight magazine, devoted its entire January 2017 issue just to gender! We in the West have been stuck in a dualistic trap other cultures have not struggled with to the same extent. For example, the Navajo or Diné and other Native peoples have historically honored non-binary, or two-spirit, people instead of rejecting them or criminalizing their existence.

As a general rule, I would say that *institutional religion tends to think of people as very simple, and therefore the law must be very complex to protect them in every situation. Jesus does the opposite: He treats people as very complex—different in religion, lifestyle, virtue, temperament, and success—and keeps the law very simple in order to bring them to God:* A legal expert put him to the test: “Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?” He replied to him, “‘You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.’ This is the first and foremost, and the second is like it: ‘You are to love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hangs everything in the Law and in the Prophets” (Matthew 22:35-40).

If I were to say this apart from Jesus’ authority, you would rightly accuse me of being simplistic, naïve, and reductionistic. Yet Jesus’ approach takes the risk of allowing people the freedom to be themselves and to love God according to the shape of their own heart, soul, body, and mind! Religion developed for the sake of social control, but Jesus does not give us much grist for the social control mill. For Jesus, it is all about union—union with God, others, and *what is*, however it presents itself. Do not let the labels trip you up—woman, man, transgender, cisgender, straight, bisexual, gay, queer. We all belong, but how cleverly our moral pretenses prevent us from struggling with what is right in front of us! How ingeniously our ego protects itself from compassion and understanding.

Jesus, like the cosmos itself, constantly affirms two parallel drives *toward diversity and toward communion*. The whole of creation cannot be lying.

## **A Cross-Section of Space-Time**

Tuesday, October 29, 2019

*Choan-Seng Song, a theologian and author, has worked tirelessly to decolonize the image of God and Jesus brought to people in Asia by Western missionaries. His writings are a wonderful example of the global nature of movements emerging in Christianity. Song was born in the East and still identifies with his Asian culture while he's been educated and worked in the West. His foundational text is the Bible, but he is also influenced by political and economic theories. In his book Jesus, the Crucified People, Song articulates how Jesus works to this day, within each of us and our churches, no matter what our culture.*

[Jesus] burnt himself out totally, like a candle, to give light to the people living under the power of darkness. He lived, toiled, and died solely for that purpose. But unlike a candle he did not just melt away, leaving no trace. . . . And though a candle is unable to prevent the return of darkness as soon as it is extinguished, Jesus' light has burned on and has ignited countless new lights in the world. . . .

Perhaps Jesus waited, for these past two thousand years, to hear something different about him from the parts of the world now called Third World. Who could blame Jesus if he has grown a little tired of hearing over and over essentially the same thing about him said, taught, proclaimed, and preached . . . for so many centuries with only slight variations . . . ? He himself strove to bring fresh air into the traditions of his own religion. He must have been unable to suppress a sense of irony to know that the churches established in his name have come to revere him as a tradition that allows little fresh air to enter. Now that new voices are being enunciated about him by those . . . outside the traditional framework of Christianity, he must be experiencing an emancipation from the confinement of orthodoxy that has immobilized him. . . .

Jesus as a historical person can be identified within a particular cross-section of space-time. . . . That particular cross-section of space-time

proves, from the Christian standpoint, to be an extraordinary segment in human history. [It] was not a mere thirty years limited to the small confines of the land in which he was born. His time seems to stretch to eternity and his space extends to all the universe. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever” (13:8). John . . . in a flash of penetrating theological hindsight grasped the meaning of Jesus in relation to the world when he said: “The Word became flesh” (1:14; Revised Standard Version). What a mystery is packed into this brief statement! The Word that was in the beginning of time now comes into the thick of our time. The God who filled the space of chaos with creation now fills our space of suffering, strife, and death with the Word-become-flesh.

*I so appreciate Song’s focus on the human person of Jesus and the freedom Jesus must experience in the voices that speak of him today from the center of their own culture, language, and lived experience. But Song also honors the reality of the Universal Christ who has been present to all people for all time. He encourages us to remain open to the ever-unfolding truth of the Christ present in every life and every culture.*

\* C. S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Fortress Press: 1996), ix, x.

## **A Transcultural Teaching**

Wednesday, October 30, 2019

*Every disciple of the kingdom is like a householder who draws out from his storage room, things both old and new. —Matthew 13:52*

*This text inspired this year's Daily Meditations theme of "Old and New: An Evolving Faith." Christianity isn't done growing and changing. Jesus himself invites us to take things out of our faith-filled "storage room" and discern what is essential. We don't want the church or the Christian tradition to become an antique shop just preserving old things. We want to build on old things and allow them to be useful in different ages, vocabularies, and cultures. We want our faith to be ever new, so that it can speak to souls alive and in need right now! Otherwise, the faith we cherish so much stops working and it can't do its job of turning our hearts to God and to one another.*

*One thing will never change, however. Our faith is founded on the life and death of Jesus the Christ. Sebastian Moore (1917–2014), was a Benedictine monk of Downside Abbey in England. He insisted that we as Christians could not lose sight of the fact that the church was formed by clinging to a scandalous memory—the shameful execution of Jesus. Moore wrote:*

The Church came into existence as a community that preserved the dangerous memory of Jesus—the memory of his public crucifixion and his subsequent return among his frightened followers in a way that was totally without reproach but was rather utterly new and beyond anything that could have been previously imagined. This new radical community has held together over two thousand years, as a community based, at bottom, on mutual love and not, as with other human institutions on fear.

The Church's contemplation of this dangerous memory is what we call 'theology', which is actually founded on the marriage of sacred Scripture with philosophy—particularly classical Greek philosophy. This is important. A religion . . . that is without theology quickly becomes fundamentalist as it

begins to interpret Scripture in a literal way, full of cultural bias and with little rational underpinning.

Fundamentalism is always culture-bound, whereas, although the story of Jesus is historical, set in a particular time, place and culture, his teaching is essentially transcultural. So, too, should be the teaching of his Church. . . .

The Church should not minimise the radically different nature of its revelation. Christian revelation is founded in the person of Jesus who invites us into the freedom of God's love . . . nevertheless, for too much of its history, indeed since the time of Constantine, the Catholic Church has not in practice demonstrated this God-offered freedom but has rather been associated with worldly power . . . [and] it is important to acknowledge this historical failing of the Christian Church.

*Like Sebastian Moore, I believe that at times we as a church have lost the thread, so to speak, and been more concerned with power and privilege than Jesus' life and teachings. Too often our leadership has relied on shame and fear to influence people far more than love, which Jesus was all about.*

\*Sebastian Moore, *The Contagion of Jesus: Doing Theology as If It Mattered* (Orbis Books: 2008), 59-60.