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Admitting Ignorance (Fr. John Garvey)

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Brueghel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

Believers are often challenged with this question: How can you believe that God cares more for human beings than for other creatures, or any other part of creation? We have answered too confidently sometimes, almost as if we could know the mind of God. We know that God does love human beings, and the Cross and Resurrection show the extent and depth of that love.

But we do not know that God does not love the rest of creation in ways we cannot fathom. I remember a poem by Jorge Luis Borges in which the Word becomes flesh for every part of creation—a tiger for the sake of tigers, and so forth. While the particular Christian metaphor may not be relevant to the rest of creation—and Borges was himself apparently agnostic—this does point us toward a necessary humility. It is impossible for us to imagine how God delights in the Horsehead Nebula or in sea anemones, but it is also impossible to imagine that he does not.

Look at the delight in creation that shines in Psalm 104, which is crowded with trees, animals, people bringing forth wine and bread from God's earth, and "the young lions roar for prey, seeking their food from God." And these wonderful lines:

O Lord, how manifold are thy works!

In wisdom hast thou made them all;

the earth is full of thy creatures.

*Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with things innumerable,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships,
and Leviathan, which thou didst form to sport in it.*

It is a delight that the last line can be translated, “Leviathan, who you made to play with.” This reminds me of Brueghel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, a panorama of human activity, with a man plowing, a ship getting set to sail, and, in one corner, two tiny legs going into the water. Both the painting and the psalm are antidotes to human self-importance, even as they celebrate something deeply human.

The universe is a spiritual reality that manifests itself materially. Matter is not its foundation. This cannot be proven, but it can be discerned in partial ways, through prayer and meditation, even liturgically.

By “spiritual” I do not mean something ethereal or specter-like; I mean something more real than what can be weighed and measured. It can be encountered. It is interesting that the most fruitful Buddhist/Christian meetings have been among contemplative monks, who spend a lot of time in stillness.

Rather than use a word like “spiritual,” which has been worked to death in many unhelpful ways, it might be better to say that the universe is the expression of something more than matter and energy.

And it is important not to impose our metaphors-legal, architectural, dramatic-on what this means, by lurching into talk of a divine plan or intention. The “thatness” of the universe is its mystery, as Wittgenstein saw. And it really is beyond words, or the sort of analysis science brings to understanding.

The problem with much atheistic writing is that it confuses extremely close description, the best currently available to us (this is science’s province and genius), with real explanation. The problem with too many religious writers is that they try to explain too much. We really must be able to say, even at times when an answer may seem crucial, “I don’t know.” Here the Orthodox idea of the *theologoumenon* is important. You can say, “It might be like this-you may believe it, and it won’t contradict what has been revealed-but it may not be like this.” Truth is approached humbly, and the approach is a form of seeking rather than an insistence on certainty at every point. There are some things that are essential to

Christianity: the completely divine and completely human nature of Jesus, the belief that he shows us what the Father is like, his death for us and his Resurrection for us, his command that we love one another, even our enemies.

After that we are left to see, in a tradition that includes the lives of many holy and perceptive men and women, how these beliefs are worked out, and what we may learn by sitting every day in prayer, and joining with others in the Eucharist, as we wait for God's will to be revealed-usually, though not always, in silence.

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