

## Bridging Faith and Science

### Loving Your Neighbor in the Twenty-First Century: Our Planetary Communion of Subjects

I'm thrilled to be here and priming our spiritual imaginations before Kathleen Biggin's shares her wisdom with us ... so I want to begin with a story:

In 2013 I was able to attend a conference where Dr. Linda Hogan, a lively Irish moral theologian was speaking about the vital role the arts play in the formation of an "ethical imagination" capable of stimulating significant moral, cultural, social and political change. She investigated the role literature and art play in this shift in consciousness -- but after her talk we chatted about how science -- a creative way to understand the world we live in -- also played a formidable role in crafting an ethical imagination robust enough to address Climate change.

But how we see the relationship between science and faith can help or hurt this moral formation.

If we think they are in conflict, science will be looked upon with suspicion at best and contempt at worst. If we think that science is siloed away from faith, completely independent from our spiritual lives, then it will be seen as foreign and of no spiritual value. Our wonderful pope in *Laudato Si* reminds Catholics that divine revelation comes from both the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature -- in the blaze of the Sun, a dew drop, and the face of a poor person. Thus science can play a role in forming robust ethical imaginations when science and faith are in dialogue or integrated because it allows both science and religion to be in a meaningful relationship ... and be shaped ... by each other. These 4 models (Conflict, Independence, Dialogue, and Integration) were proposed by American scholar Ian Barbour decades ago and try to reflect on which has informed your Catholic imagination.

So what if we do as Pope Francis and let science dialogue with faith ... would it change anything? Let's test it... If the greatest moral principle guiding the way Catholics ought to act is Love God with your whole heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself, then how do we love our neighbors today? Maybe Catholic Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez can give us guidance ... he states that "Unless you know the names of poor people, you are not in solidarity with them." Solidarity means knowing their names and what brings them fullness of

life. Canadian ethicist Stephen Scharper added a bit to what Fr. Gutierrez said: “unless you know the names of certain species, learn how to communicate with them, spend time with ecosystems, with rivers, discern the patterns of animals that move across your life course, your ravines, you are not in solidarity” (Stephen B. Scharper, *For Earth’s Sake: Toward a Compassionate Ecology*, 2013, 193).

You cannot love who you do not know, nor will you care enough to change the human habits hurting the health, economics, and safety of our human and other than human neighbors.

Science can help us love better.

But How? I think wisdom from one of my favorite theologian professors will help. Think of yourself as a juggler with three balls -- the God ball, the world ball, and the human ball. So, when our appreciation of one of them changes, how we interact with all the balls must be re-imagined, or else all three balls will come crashing to the ground.

Most definitely, how we appreciate the world ball has changed, so we need to juggle in new ways:

So...

Who is my neighbor now that I know humanity has emerged from a sacred universe story that is 13.8 billion years old?

Who is my neighbor now that I understand that the emergence of human beings was one of Earth’s magnificent bursts of creativity not unlike the moment when Earth erupted with color when flowering plants emerged 130 million years ago?

Who is my neighbor now that I know my body is powered by sunshine gifted to me via green, photosynthetic plant life?

Who is my neighbor now that I know that I am intricately bound to all other species from fungi to marsupials to bacteria?<sup>1</sup> As theologian Norman Wirzba reminds us that inside our bodies, it is a zoo ... with so many organisms working together in my body to allow me to flourish. I am never singular nor alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Hawkin, 71-72.

And we need to ask how do I love my neighbors when storms are more frequent and more intense? When oceans are warmer, more acidic, and pushing fishing populations away from traditional areas devastating long standing fishing communities? When land is being submerged due to rising sea levels and indigenous tribes in Louisiana are climate refugees with they land and history literally being washed away? When storms are so devastating that communities we love are quite literally washed away? When health, safety, and jobs worldwide are being compromised due to changes in planetary life forces?

Science offers us imaginative ways of knowing our world, our selves, and God -- the Gifter of this world. This is part of the gift being offered by Kathleen Biggins tonight -- what is happening in our world.

But a question still needs to be asked:

How did our other-than human inhabitants of Earth cease to be our neighbors and excluded from being worthy of love and care?

How did we get to a point where we thought Earth contributed nothing to our spiritual journeys?

This is a big question, and tonight I will give you a very short version -- but it centers on our fear of not being loved by God. My hope is that you can see that it is this same fear and poorly informed that leads some to resist seeing Climate change as a spiritual matter.

How did our Catholic imaginations stop seeing Nature as sacred and her planetary inhabitants as neighbors?

It was in part thanks to a shift in how we appreciated the world ball. We stopped seeing Earth as Mother and began to see it as a Machine -- a clock made by an absentee God. See how the change in the world ball affected the God ball too?

Why? There were many reasons but here are a few:

First, lets fast forward to the 14th century where a biological phenomenon decimated the population of Europe and permanently changed the social fabric of society. The Black Plague changed how humans understood God, disease, church, government, the healing arts, the human body, and Earth. A small glimpse into the panic and pain experienced at this time is mirrored in our early reactions to

COVID. This virus permanently reconfigured every part of society -- where we could go, who can we touch, how we shopped, how we taught our children, how we saw the doctor, how we paid for items, what we legislated to be able to protect the most vulnerable ... <sup>2</sup> The world ball as a comforting Mother didn't fit ... and God who is Love and Infinitely powerful also did not seem to fit either. So Earth was seen with suspicion, God was exiled out of this place and even the human ball changed ... the predominant way to see humans was as sinful and thus it was just that the Plague punished us.

Fast forward a couple hundred years to 1543 when Nicolaus Copernicus proved that the Earth was not at the center of the universe and Galileo reiterated in 1633. In one fell swoop, the world ball changed ... and so did the human ball. Earth and humanity lost its privileged place at the center of the universe -- and people were afraid that we were less loveable by God. This was so feared that the Church placed him under house arrest ... but in 1992 an apology was issued from the Catholic Church for this miscarriage of justice.

This disenchantment with the world ball and desire to control it fueled the Scientific Revolution in the 17th century, which ultimately gave rise to our industrialized world. But to justify the damage we will have to do to the world ball to fuel our new industrial way of being necessitated another change in the world ball. Would you exploit and pillage your mom's resources? or another persons'? Somehow our imaginations say that this is wrong. But a machine? Using a machine is exactly its purpose so the world ball as a machine allowed the massive extraction of natural resources.

Listen to how some of the biggest influences were describing Earth during this time:

- Mathematician Isaac Newton, promised to extract the secrets of Mother Nature whom he saw as a wicked temptress.
- The philosophy of Rene Descartes offered a mechanical vision of nature -- inert matter controlled externally by purely natural forces.

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<sup>2</sup> The greatest pandemic in Europe was the Black Death, coined this in the 17th century, and it launched what is termed the 'second plague pandemic' that spanned from 1346 until 1844 with some recording the plague being present in some European location every year during that time. This biological phenomenon effected all circles of social life, economics, politics, religion, health, and is even called the most important 'engine of change' between the 14th and 17th century. It indelibly changed the social fabric of society and how God, disease, church, government, and the healing arts, including the body, is perceived. Retrieved from J. N. Hays, *Epidemics and Pandemics: Their Impacts on Human History* (Santa Barbara California: ABC-CLIO, c2005 Online Resource) p. 41-59.

- Philosopher and political figure Francis Bacon was passionate "to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race" over nature.

Thus, the world ball now longer needed to be revered and protected. The human ball was now the technicians in control of the world ball -- put in charge by an absentee God.

But what was the spiritual cost of these changes?

Neither a temptress nor a machine is appreciated as a neighbor to be loved.

And God became known as an absentee Divine Clockmaker God. Loved at a distance ... often so far away God is forgotten

And Humans are elevated to a powerful position above nature.

Thus, in the 1920s and then 1950s Pierre Teilhard de Chardin taught about Darwin's principle of evolution -- he challenged all three balls ... and in return was ostracized and sent away from his home in France to the US. When Tennessee passed the Butler Act in 1925, banning the teaching of evolution in public schools, this was since the human ball was seen as above nature and not emerging from the world ball. High school biology teacher John Scopes then defied this, setting the stage for the Scopes Trial -- which further entrenched religion in conflict with science. Have you ever thought why evolution ignited so much wrath as compared to other principals ... like gravity? I believe it is Fear.

If the way we juggled the three balls told the story of human superiority and that is why God loved us, then we would reject a common origin and familial relationship with monkeys as the new world ball was telling us.

If we interpret Scripture based on human superiority, then our Belovedness comes from our humanness as is demonstrated by Adam and Eve. This puts evolution in conflict with faith.

But science has told us that the world ball is a dynamic communion of neighbors who have specific needs, gifts, and names! And it reminds us in spectacular ways that God is both intimately close and infinitely far. The human ball must change too -- and thanks to science forming the imaginations of so many theologians we know that humanity has been birthed into, and through, this evolutionary world, and this does not mean we are less special. Far from it! It is in the human that the sacred universe has awakened to itself. We are one of the many cosmic characters in a grand, sacred love story initiated by God. We are loved ... but so are they.

When we lose sight of this out of fear, we forget who -- and whose -- we are & we stop loving all our many neighbors and God.

I think Catholic ethicist Linda Hogan is right. We need the arts and sciences to tell the sacred universe story and help form spiritual moral imaginations robust enough to address Climate change. You may want to see how this is being accomplished in the many Climate statements made by religious communities and leaders across the globe at the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology.

Now, I am thrilled to introduce Kathleen Biggins, who takes her place alongside poets, artists, marine biologists, ecologists, Nobel prize winners and activists who are helping people of faith to form authentic bio-spiritual moral imaginations capable of addressing Climate Change.