

## EUCCHARIST

Creation Spirituality calls us outside the orthodox theological boxes of fall-redemption and the ransom theory of the atonement. In a context of justice-compassion, a parent is nothing short of monstrous who would not only require that his or her own child be murdered so that others could be spared, but set the child up to that end. A god who governs creation like that can only invoke terror. Love is out of the question. Likewise, a remote god who intervenes based on someone's degree of righteousness is capricious at best. At the original end of the story of Job, having lost patience with his neighbors who try to convince him that he must have done something to deserve all the bad luck that has come his way, Job says, "If my land cries out against me, or its furrows weep together – if I ate its bounty without recompense, or gave its laborers reason to complain – let weeds flourish where once was wheat; let thistle take over the barley field!"<sup>1</sup>

The Old Testament story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac is paired in the Common Lectionary with Romans 6. An angel speaks to Abraham as he is about to murder his son and says, "Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Abraham then looks around and finds a ram trapped by its horns in a thicket, and he sacrifices that animal in Isaac's place. In the New Testament letter of Paul of Tarsus to the Romans, Chapter 6, Paul is in the midst of his argument about salvation and grace. "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. . . Now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages

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<sup>1</sup>Job 31:38-40. Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures, Vol. III: The Writings* (Altamira Press 1999), p. 245.

of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Rom. 6:14; 22-23. This is the “ransom theory of the atonement,” which means that Jesus died in order to redeem humanity. This theology is further illustrated in John 3:16-21, and Revelation 5:12.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life . . . Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God . . .  
... . Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!

The pairing of the Abraham/Isaac “text of terror” with these passages is no accident. This ransom theology is embedded in the Christian sacrament of Communion. Christian Eucharist is interpreted as the commemoration of Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, where he told them he would be betrayed by them and would go to his death on their behalf. Christianity has made a high ceremony out of it, even a magical working known as “transubstantiation” in which the bread and wine are believed to become literally the flesh and blood of Jesus as the priest celebrates the Mass. To spill the wine or drop the host then becomes a sacrilege. Literal misinterpretation has resulted in psychic, spiritual, and physical abuse, not to mention accusations of cannibalism.

Holy Communion has been used as a kind of litmus test since the Inquisition of the 13th through 15th Centuries, and recently, during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, when American Catholics were warned by some Bishops that if they support abortion rights, they are not only out-of-step with church teaching, but living in a state of sin, and so Communion, which for Catholics is the ultimate symbol of their membership in the realm of God, is denied them. The original argument about grace put forward by the apostle Paul is overthrown in the name of political, social, and personal control of people by fear.

The Eucharist is at the heart of the Christian liturgy. But Matthew Fox proposes that far from being a commemoration of salvation from a state of sin, or a means of control and oppression of the people by the institutional church,

“The Eucharist is about the universe loving us unconditionally still one more time and giving itself to us in the most intimate way (as food and drink). . . The Eucharist is heart food from the cosmos – the “mystical body of Christ” and the Cosmic Christ or Buddha nature found in all beings in the universe – to us. Christ is the light of the world, which we now know is made only of light. Flesh is light and light is flesh. We eat, drink, sleep, breathe, and love that light. The Eucharist is also our hearts expanding and responding generously: “Yes, we will.” We will carry on the heart-work called compassion, the work of the cosmos itself.”<sup>2</sup>

When we look to what we know about the universe today as a revelation of the nature of God/dess-Creator, Eucharist becomes a sacrament of thanksgiving, celebration, and commitment as we move through the Wheel of the Year. Rather than fall/redemption, or ransom, Eucharist becomes Wisdom’s Feast, The Willing Sacrifice, and Sacred Marriage.

#### **A. Wisdom’s Feast**

Post-modern people know there is no separate Grandfather Almighty God out there watching over us. We know that good and bad things happen, and we reject the idea that God somehow intervenes with good for some and bad for others. Yet we still are unwilling to abandon the teachings of Jesus that the realm of Godde is all around us if we just use our eyes and ears and look and listen. Anglican Bishop John Shelby Spong calls those post-modern people *Exiles*<sup>3</sup> for whom traditional church teachings no longer seem relevant to post-modern experience.

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<sup>2</sup>Fox, *Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh*, p. 271

<sup>3</sup>John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

In *The Universe Story*, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry illustrate how new millenium physics teaches that one aspect of the nature of the Universe is relationship:

Without a sensitivity to primordial communication within the universe, the universe's story comes to an end. That this is certainly the case with an individual organism we can readily appreciate in the case of the monarch butterfly. Climbing out of the pupal shell, stretching its wings in the drying sunlight, what other than the voices of the universe can that butterfly rely upon for guidance? It must make a journey that will cover territory filled with both dangers and possibilities, none of which has ever been experienced before. To rely on its own personal experience or knowledge would be a disaster for the butterfly. Instead it finds itself surrounded by voices of the past, of the other insects, of the wind and the rain and the leaves of the trees.

The information of the genetic material comes forth precisely within its interactions. That is, the monarch butterfly has little if any individual awareness of the difference between beneficial winds and dangerous winds until it finds itself confronted by them in reality. The winds speak to the butterfly, the taste of the water speaks to the butterfly, the shape of the leaf speaks to the butterfly and offers a guidance that resonates with the wisdom coded into the butterfly's being. Such communication takes place beneath the level of language, even that of genetic language. It functions at the primordial reality of primal contact. The source of the guidance is both within and without . . .<sup>4</sup>

The Butterfly is not *Exile*. The Butterfly lives in a seamless realm, a matrix, poetically in the palm of Goddes' hand, not alien or estranged. What kind of liturgy, or worship experience, would celebrate the kind of inclusive, nurturing community the Butterfly knows without thinking about it?

Even though Communion has been the defining act of worship for Christians, the word "Communion" means a common experience, a common thought, as well as a shared meal. Our most important celebrations are based on sharing food or drink. Eating is one of our most

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<sup>4</sup>Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, p. 42.

intimate activities, and is rendered sacred in feasts such as Thanksgiving, birthday parties, honorary banquets, or holiday meals. The Olive Garden chain of restaurants advertises that “when you’re here, you’re family,” and the commercials always show an extended family from great-grandfather down to the baby, passing food and drink among themselves in a ritual celebration. Many spiritual traditions include a shared meal, or cup of welcome, an extension of hospitality to the stranger, a commemoration of common experience. Pagan ritual ends with shared cakes & wine.

Eucharist at its root means to give thanks. Just like the Monarch Butterfly, who finds its way home every year by listening to the elements of the world in which it lives, or like the Salmon, who returns from the sea every year, climbs the waterfalls, and lays its eggs in the rivers where the next generation continues the cycle, we can think of ourselves in connection to the universe in the same way. Fox says, “Interconnectivity is the heart of the Eucharistic experience: God and humanity coming together, God and flesh, the flesh of wheat, wine, sunshine, soil, water, human ingenuity, stars, supernovas, galaxies, storms, fireballs – every Eucharist has a 15-billion-year sacred story that renders it holy.”<sup>5</sup>

Liturgy brings the people together to consider our place in the universe, to celebrate or commemorate our lives together, to become clear what our purpose is as a community, to strengthen ourselves for the task at hand, and to send ourselves out to continue our common work, transformed and in solidarity. A shared meal using symbols of our shared lives and work is a powerful act. For example, the shared Passover Seder celebrated by Jews every year is commemoration of not only their original liberation from captivity in Egypt, but their continued liberation and their vision of returning to celebrate Passover – *Next Year in Jerusalem*. It is a

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<sup>5</sup>*Id.*

call to Exiles to remembrance and hope. It is not called “Communion,” but that is what it is.

The following words from the prophet Isaiah and from the Wisdom literature of the Jewish tradition are an invitation to *Wisdom’s Feast*, to Communion: To celebration of the certainty of God’s love and protection – exactly what the Butterfly experiences as it finds its way to its breeding grounds high in the mountains of Colorado.

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and those who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without price, for our God calls us away from oppression and greed to a realm of justice and love [pour wine].

God calls us away from famine and poverty to an abundance of milk and honey. [pour milk]

Wisdom orders all things well: First the grain, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear [break bread].

To inherit Wisdom is as sweet as the honeycomb [hold up a bowl of honey];

Wisdom has set her table. She calls from the highest places, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Come, for all has been made ready.”

[All are invited to come to the table, dip bread into milk, honey or wine. Take as many pieces of bread as is desired. Some may wish to feed one another.

## **B. The Willing Sacrifice**

The basic premise or developmental theory Karen Armstrong uses in *The Battle for God* is the relationship in human intellect or consciousness between Mythos and Logos – or the relationship between mystic revelation about the meaning of life, and the scientific explanation of the nature of the universe discovered through the reason of the mind. In premodern times, the stories told about the meaning of human life – Mythos – was *understood* to be metaphor; and our human ability to experience the physical realities of the world – Logos – was in balance with

Mythos, so that seedtime and harvest, life, death, and rebirth, had meaning. Premodern people were clear about the distinction between myth and physical reality. This is why we have stories about people who slip into Faery accidentally, like Rumpelstiltskin, or legends about how the veil between the worlds is thin in particular times or places. As human consciousness has evolved, and more of the universe has been scientifically understood, the balance has changed between Mythos and Logos, or emotion and reason. By the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, reason held sway to such an extent that religious thinkers of the day wanted to be considered just as rational as the scientists, and so they insisted that the old religious myths, like the myth of Creation in the Western world, were literally and rationally true. The problem is that once myth becomes literalized, it becomes unbelievable. A lot of unbelievable religious Christian myth was overthrown by Martin Luther and other founders of Protestant religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The ultimate result of this predominance of reason was the theology of the transcendence, remoteness, and even the death of God.

In the post-modern period where we are now, there is a movement toward rebalancing mythos and logos, to re-mythologize, or re-enchant the world in which we live. The spiritual task for today's world is to live in the metaphor without making it literal.

As the Wheel of the Year turns, we are constantly reminded of the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth – of the cycle of seed transforming into plant, transforming into fruit that sustains life. What gets forgotten or ignored in traditional Christian interpretations of harvest celebrations is the metaphor of sacrifice as a natural part of life. In the language of myth, the young Green Man God of the Beltane seedtime matures into the Sun King God of the Summer Solstice, and becomes in turn the sacrificed God of the harvest – John Barleycorn – who gives up his life so that the land will bring forth food and the people will prosper. As the life of the Sun

God wanes toward winter, the life of the consort Goddess of the Moon waxes. Her light provides for the harvest work to continue well into the night so that every last bit of sustenance can be gleaned from the earth. Then at the Winter Solstice, the Goddess nurtures the seed of the next Sun King, and brings forth the Child at Spring: Imbolc – about February 2 – which is the time of the first births among the animals: – the deer, the cattle, the sheep – and the cycle begins again.

It is normal and natural for humans living close to the earth, who are dependent on the cycles of the seasons, to have invented this great metaphor of the Wheel of the Year. Most of us in the technological world of today have lost track of this. Many of us don't even know the scientific facts of the solstices and the equinoxes, let alone the cross-quarter days that herald the changes in seasons. We look forward to summer's heat, so long as it's not too hot. If it is, we make sure we keep our climate-control devices in good working order. We look forward to Winter and skiing and Christmas, and if we're lucky to have a fireplace, we can enjoy the romance of a fire, and if we really don't like the dirt and effort of chopping and hauling wood, we can switch on a gas fire.

The meaning of the dying-rising God of the seasons who sacrifices life for life has been long lost to us, and in fact that metaphor has been corrupted by theologies of dominion and original sin. Sacrifice in the context of original sin means blood required in expiation or payment. But sacrifice means to make sacred, to make holy. Sacrifice as giving life for life willingly, without thought, is actually at the heart of the nature of the universe in which we have evolved.

In the chapter titled *Supernovas*, from *The Universe Story*, by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, the Willing Sacrifice is seen as cosmic metaphor:

Eventually, in a million years or in several billion years, each star's

resources . . . are all used up. If the mass of a star at this point is large enough, its gravitational pressures will destroy the star. The remaining materials will rush toward each other. Nothing in the universe can now stop them. All remaining structure is destroyed as the star implodes to a pulsar – a super-dense mass of neutrons – or [it] collapses all the way down to a naught entity, a singularity of space and time, a black hole. . . .

And yet in the great violent collapse of the star there is a surprising twist of events: the supernova. Not everything is pulled into the nothingness of the pulsar or the black hole. The neutrinos, those wispy and seemingly unimportant elementary particles, escape the collapse. As the star implodes, the neutrinos rush out in all directions to blow off the outer layers of the star, which contain the carbon and oxygen and nitrogen and other elements. Freed from the gravitational death of the star, these elements journey into the night sky, eventually to be drawn together with other elements. Under their own attraction, they form an entirely new system. A new star forms, new planets form, new life forms, and perhaps new consciousness forms; certainly a new area of the story of the universe begins out of the supernova explosion that destroys the old stellar world. . . .<sup>6</sup>

This awesome cycle repeats throughout the universe, and down to the microcosm of our gardens or our window boxes where we might grow a tomato plant or two, and it is incorporated into the mythos of our lives through the examples of the life of Buddha, or the death of Jesus. But we are easily overwhelmed by the enormity of such sacrifice. Christianity especially teaches us humility that takes the form of despair that we can ever live up to such a model. We search for meaning in the notion of finding the “Christ within us,” and are convinced that our everyday lives can’t possibly include that “Christ consciousness,” which was willing to suffer death on a cross for that very impossibility. In his discussion of “Shadow, Trickster, and Willing Sacrifice,”<sup>7</sup> Unitarian Universalist Rev. Dr. Jeremy Taylor points out that the Willing Sacrifice is an archetype that lives within each of our lives at the most mundane levels. Whenever any

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<sup>6</sup>Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>7</sup>Taylor, Jeremy, *The Living Labyrinth* (Paulist Press, 1998), pp. 256-260.

growth or change happens in conscious life, the old way perforce dies to the new. In the dream world that Taylor writes about, the image of death becomes not physical death, but change – and while change can be and often is individually profound, *any* change at any level is actually the willing sacrifice of the old for the new. Taylor says that even the act of wondering about change, or pausing upon waking to ponder the meaning of a dream is the Willing Sacrifice archetype at work. But those fantastic examples of the Christ or the Buddha overshadow the microcosmic changes in individual lives. While great moments of willing sacrifice are meant to be inspirational, the result is that most people avoid taking part in these moments at all costs. “For this reason, the mundane tasks of living are all too often, by definition, ‘not spiritual.’” So the willing sacrifice of countless millions of women who deny their own need for creativity and personal self-actualization on behalf of their husbands, children, families, communities is unacknowledged, and indeed adds even more sacrifice as women become invisible in terms of who individual women may actually be. The same point applies to the willing sacrifice of countless millions of men equally trapped by the demands of patriarchal obligation to continue the family heritage, to continue the family business, to provide, protect, and defend.

All these acts, from the most spectacular example of religiously motivated martyrdom and offering up one’s best energies for the benefit of others, down to the most mundane gamble – risking a new behavior in the hopes of winning a little more time, a little more love, a little more insight – all embody and exemplify the archetype of Willing Sacrifice. For that reason, they all provide real, concrete occasions for old consciousness and self-awareness to “die” and be renewed, deepened, and expanded, and for broader and deeper realms of consciousness and self-awareness to be “born.”<sup>8</sup>

The ritual act that will illustrate for us our role, our part, how we fit into or align with the

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<sup>8</sup>*Id.*

power of this sacrificial life, death, and rebirth is in the celebration of breaking bread together. The act of taking the bread made from the first grains of the harvest, breaking it, and sharing it among ourselves; and the act of pouring out the libation of wine from the first grapes of the harvest and sharing that among ourselves, can put us in touch with that vast ongoing process. We may call this ritual a Eucharist, a thanksgiving, for the Universe loving us unconditionally, and giving itself to us yet again. And we also give of ourselves to one another, and by doing so, we participate in the cosmic metaphor of the willing sacrifice, which we understand to be justice/compassion.

ONE: From the sun to the land, from the land to the stalk, from the stalk to the grain, from the grain to this bread, I consecrate this food in the name of Creator God/dess.

ALL: May their blessings shower upon us through eternity. So mote it be.

ONE: From the moon to the land, from the land to the vine, from the vine to the berry, from the berry to the juice, I consecrate this drink in the name of the Creator God/dess

ALL: May their blessings shower upon us through eternity. So mote it be.

### **C. Sacred Marriage**

In order to include the metaphor of Sacred Marriage in a ritual Eucharist, it needs to be understood in a much wider context than simply the sexual union of a man and a woman in order to produce children. It needs to be understood at a cosmic level, as it was of old and in the context of our present-day new cosmology, rather than the cosmology of the ancient world. In that world, the Goddess, the Great Mother, brought forth all life parthenogenetically – *i.e.*, without the benefit of input from the God. Later, when humans had figured out the role of sun and seed, the metaphor of sacred marriage was ritualized in the ceremonial union of the king or ruler with the representative of the Goddess in the Temple. Such a ceremony assured the strength, the fertility, the success, the safety of the land and the people. This ceremony is called “temple prostitution” by most clergy, which tinges it with degradation and evil – but that is

merely the gloss of 1,600 years of Church dogma. The union of the sun god and the earth goddess, or the Sky with the Earth, is as old as humankind and as varied in interpretation as all the tribes.

For example, the Old Testament Song of Solomon, used traditionally in marriage ceremonies, is actually sacred marriage liturgy from a Mesopotamian ritual reenacting the sexual union of two deities: the fertility god Dummuuzi-Tammuz, represented by the king, and his sister Inanna-Astarte, represented by a priestess. The ritual assured fertility of land and people for the coming year. In these sophisticated times, we have little need for that kind of sympathetic magic, at least in a literal sense. But our pre-modern ancestors knew very well they were dealing with metaphor (mythos) and not with literal truth. They knew they were journeying between the worlds of dream time and waking time. This passionate hymn to sex and abundance would never have been included in the canon if its pagan origins had not been transformed into religious allegory, first recounting God's love for Israel and the history of that relationship, and then reinterpreted as an allegory of Christ's love for the church.

Only 400 years have elapsed since early in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century when Copernicus showed us that the earth is not the center of the universe – and for probably 250 of those 400 years, the knowledge has only been available to the rich and educated. No wonder theology has such a hard time breaking out of tradition. Even today, although we now know that there are billions and billions of galaxies and stars and planets, and incredible mysteries of dark matter, black holes, and the theory of creation itself, we are still limited in our perception because we are earth-bound.

Here is Genesis as told with the understanding of the new cosmology:

At the base of the serene tropical rainforest sits this cosmic

hurricane. At the base of the seaweed's column of time is the trillion-degree blast that begins everything. All that exists in the universe traces back to this exotic, ungraspable seed event, a microcosmic grain, a reality layered with the power to fling a hundred billion galaxies through vast chasms in a flight that has lasted fifteen billion years. The nature of the universe today and of every being in existence is integrally related to the nature of this primordial Flaring Forth. The universe is a single multiform development in which each event is woven together with all others in the fabric of the space-time continuum.<sup>9</sup>

What we need, in Swimme & Berry's words, is a "ritual rapport with the cosmological order and the mythic powers of the universe"<sup>10</sup> as we understand those powers today. There are many ways of relating to or bonding with each other. Our society is in a legal and liturgical debate about what constitutes "marriage." We speak of same-sex unions, partnerships, common-law marriage, single non-celibacy, extended families, how it takes a village to raise a child – yet the very nature of our creativity is a sacred marriage between inspiration and expression.

### **Sacred Marriage Feast**

ONE: Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and those who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without price, for our Godde calls us away from oppression and greed to a realm of justice and love; Godde calls us away from famine and poverty to an abundance of milk and honey.

ALL: Arise my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

ONE: [Pour Wine into a Cup] Feasts are made for Laughter; Wine gladdens our hearts;

ALL: Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready.

ONE: From the beginning, the alchemy of the Universe has provided for Life on Earth in due season.

[Pour milk into a cup]: Milk: the Mother's nurturing food.

ALL: Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready.

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<sup>9</sup>Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, p. \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. \_\_\_\_\_

ONE: [Pour honey into a bowl] Honey: the product of Sacred Community.

ALL: Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready.

ONE: [Break the Bread] From the beginning, the guiding myth of the Universe has been profligate abundance and willing sacrifice.

ALL: Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.

ONE: Come to the garden, sisters and lovers. Gather myrrh with spice, eat the honeycomb with the honey, drink the wine with the milk. Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.

[All are invited to come and partake of the elements on the table: Tear off portions of the Bread to dip into the honey; pass the common cups of wine and milk. Some participants may wish to feed each other.]

ALL: Praise and Thanks be to the Word, and the Knowledge, and the Wisdom of Godde, without which nothing was made that was made. All honor and glory and power and blessing be to you, now and forever, worlds without end, Amen.