

A Christian Science View on Climate Justice Faith & Order Convening Table, May 2017

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I *love* birds. My husband, Dick, and I are birders. Rather – he is the birder; I’m the tag-along wife. But I still love to learn with him. The birds are always teaching me something about God’s creative power - its beauty, its joy, majesty, humor, intelligence, order, and harmony. I learn it through the songs, colors, flight, majesty, and their shocking behavior. There are birds that feed on the ocean, known as ‘skimmers’. Others feed on the bugs that swarm around ants, known as ‘ant birds.’ Hummingbirds feed on nectar. Raptors feed on smaller birds, reptiles and mammals – even though it is hard to watch that part. Some birds make their nests in elaborate bags that hang on branches, far from the predators. Some make their nests out in the middle of a sandy beach. The variety of life is beyond my imagination, but each one shows us something extraordinary about the world we all live in together. They show us the value of each insect, each berry, each nut. Their adaptation to snowy conditions, the behavior of ants, the types of predators, the scarcity of food, the motion of water – all these things just hint at the interrelated details of the planet.

Just last month I had the amazing privilege and joy of exploring birds deep in the forests of Brazil. I mean deep! We were hundreds of miles from the closest human settlement. Indigenous people had left many decades ago, and small groups of birders come in to stay at this small lodge only a couple of times a year. It was like witnessing a pristine snapshot of God’s creation with very little human interference. Each of the river tributaries from the Rio Roosevelt, where we stayed, separates some species from others, so we could see how precisely birds adapt to their specific locations. We also saw new species that have not yet been identified (or, ‘defined’ by the scientific community). And of course, most of these birds we never see in North America.

But it is this love of birds and what they teach us of the world that makes the next part of my story all that much more poignant. Just the year before, my husband and I went to Costa Rica. It used to be the most prized birding haven in the world. But too often, when we ventured into the forests, we encountered an eery silence. Vast areas of lowland forests had been cut down and fragmented, causing the highlands to lose their cloud cover. Birds that had always lived there could no longer survive without the cloud cover. This specific change in weather patterns has already prevented dozens of species from being able to feed and reproduce, so they have either died off or left the area. Those of us who love to get up early to hear the morning bird chorus at this time of year know how seriously wrong it feels when the chorus goes silent. Dick and I would leave at daybreak each morning to go enjoy the morning chorus since their songs help us find them high in the trees, but each morning we were greeted with an occasional call from a lone bird – reminding us of the birds that were supposed to be there, but were not.

The loss of species in some areas of Costa Rica was staggering. And I know this is only one snapshot view of what has happened around the world as we bear witness to climate change. But I want to tell just one more birding story that brings these two experiences into perspective. This takes place on an island off the coast of Georgia, where our family is involved in a nature preserve with a biologically rich system of maritime forest and marsh-upland interface. It is exciting to see that the 30-year project bringing back Loggerhead turtles is beginning to bear fruit. Dozens of turtle nests dot the beach, and thousands of baby turtles made it to the ocean last year. It is thrilling to watch the increasingly successful breeding of the American oystercatchers, whose precarious nests have become better protected from invasive species of predators. Also, the newly installed oyster beds are reducing erosion and attracting live oysters along with other forms of sea-dependent life back to the formerly dead banks of the river.

This successful interaction between humans and earth is a small example of the way I perceive Christian Science theology in response to climate justice. Despite my experience in Costa Rica, I do not think our earth is falling headlong into oblivion; and despite my remarkable exploration expedition deep in the forests of Brazil where no humans have touched it in hundreds of years, I do not think our model is a return to a pristine earth where humans are meant to disappear. Humans are needed for the earth, and earth is needed for humans. We are called upon to discover God's plan for that mutual relationship. And that plan is where I will describe the Christian Science theology.

But before I explain the details, I want to mention an ecumenical point. Without this ecumenical conversation on this subject, I know I would not have thought so deeply about the prayer-based, faith-directed response that is so profoundly needed as our world seeks to address the devastating effects of climate change. We need to hear your voices calling us to action, and we need to learn where our own theology awakens us to give what we have to give. Christian Science theology itself is quite relevant to climate justice, but learning from you is helping me probe the depth of what Christian Science has to offer and especially how to rouse our own constituents to participate in it. I want to thank those of you who represent traditions that have contributed to the moral, spiritual, and active progress your churches have already given to the world.

Religion and science have always experienced a tug-of-war relationship. They do not succeed without the other, but they seem to repel each other simultaneously. Right where science usually pulls away from religion, climate justice calls on us to understand science in a way that brings religion *into* it. Christians understand the need to be saved, and scientists agree that the *planet* needs to be saved. The words 'Christian' and 'Science' in the name of our faith tradition carry this tension everywhere. And yet we obviously think they are inseparable. The reason is that '*Christian Science*' understands science in the context of *salvation*.

Climate justice requires a serious study of the meaning and mode of salvation because it demonstrates the threats to the physical, moral, and spiritual dimensions of being for everyone – from each person to each creature, and indeed the whole universe. A Christian Science understanding of salvation is that it applies to every aspect of God's creation – all the children of God, as well as all of the plants, animals and minerals of the planet. We are so interconnected, we cannot separate one aspect of God's

creation from another. The first chapter of Genesis is foundational to Christian Science theology, because it depicts the totality of God's creation and God's own conclusion that it is indeed 'very good.'

Salvation saves all of us from whatever has led us off course from God's original creation, which is very good. It saves us from sin as well as our mutual acts of self-destruction. It emphasizes that salvation does not await our departure from the earth, but that God's Kingdom – God's realm – is present here and now. Salvation, even in small degrees, must take place now, and our participation in it is the work of being a Christian. Christian Science theology therefore resists the bifurcation of salvation into souls versus bodies. It argues that the saving of souls is the same as the saving of human bodies and earth. The saving of our health and our morals is the same as the saving of the health of the earth, the solar system, the galaxy and the universe.

Let me illustrate the way this science of salvation works in Christian Science. Science itself is more than a study of nature, even though that is included. But science, as a search for truth is, in a broad sense, a methodology. It is the means by which we can find the reality and meaning of being. A scientific method is the way we *think* about the data before us. We can either imagine things or use a scientific process and reasoning for drawing conclusions.

It is this kind of scientific process and reasoning that Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, uses to understand God's creation and how God saves us. We understand that in our relationship between earth and sun, we can see it from two opposite perspectives. When I stand on the earth I *observe* that sun is moving around the earth, but when I change perspectives, I see that the earth is doing the moving. We are familiar with the fact that we can have two perspectives, but not two opposite truths. It is not true that the earth is revolving around the sun and the sun is revolving around the earth at the same time, even though we can appreciate both perspectives. So the methodology for finding the truth about the relationship between earth and sun is to *change the perspective*, not to argue more deeply in favor of something that has no foundation in truth.

Eddy argues that the relationship between God and us (or God's creation) operates on the same kind of scientific basis. From our human perspective, we tend to see God looking like us, made in our image – capricious, unwilling or unable to take care of all of us, let alone the whole planet. But from God's point of view – the *opposite* perspective – we see how God could say, as paraphrased from Genesis chapter 1, "I made you in *my* image. I made all creation and it *is* 'very good.'" All creation, including us and the plants, animals, rivers, and sky, is loved and cared for; we do not have the power to destroy what God has done.

Of course, that last statement is where the challenge lies. On the surface, it might appear that we are saying we can do whatever we please because God's creation will never be destroyed. But that interpretation is seriously wrong. In no way does it absolve us from the responsibility or guilt for *thinking* and behaving as if we have such power. If we *think* the sun is revolving around the earth, we would send a rocket ship in the wrong direction and *suffer* from completely missing our objective. It is wrong, and we suffer from our ignorance – or stubbornness – or whatever causes us to make the mistake.

From a scientific point of view, as demonstrated with the opposite views of earth and sun, two opposite perspectives must produce *exactly* the opposite report. Either the sun moves around the earth, or the earth moves around the sun. Both actions are not happening. So, regardless of our opinions about it, we either *must* be a good and beloved creation, or we *must* be the opposite: a sinful, sick, destructive, and dying world. We suffer from this view, as much as we would actually suffer from believing the sun is in the wrong place and acting on that false belief.

Here is where the contribution of science is powerful, necessary, and healing. We, as humans, see evidence of the rotation of the sun in the sky every day. We also see the evidence of sick and sinning people all around us. But what we see is inconsistent with what God tells us about the image of God and about everything created by God as 'very good.' Jesus healed people who appeared quite sick to the crowds around him. When he raised his friend Lazarus from death, he said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this *for the sake of the crowd* standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me" (John 11:41, 42). Jesus appears to indicate here that he saw something from a different perspective from the way the rest of the crowd was seeing it.

Science affirms that there is something greater than our own sense of things. Astronomy reminds us that our senses are wrong concerning the sun, and Christ informs us that our senses are also wrong concerning God.

Abductive reasoning is a helpful methodology for coming to terms with this difficulty with our senses. Decades and centuries passed before Copernicus' theory of a heliocentric system was fully accepted as scientific truth. Why? His ideas ran contrary to the human senses. Our more common reaction to challenging data is to defend the most complicated explanations in order to preserve our own perspectives. But Copernicus' exercise of abductive reasoning demonstrates why the simplest explanation is the better choice. Extraordinarily complex depictions of planetary orbits necessary to explain how the earth was the center of the solar system finally yielded to the simplest explanation that they all revolved around the sun.

It is difficult to admit we are wrong. Church liturgies remind us to confess our sins over and over again, but we still find it difficult to stop defending our own views. We hold to our senses' perspectives, regardless of how many times God has told us that the opposite is true and that the goodness of creation is proclaimed in the Bible. Changing our perspective is always hard. But despite our difficulty in giving up long-held convictions, the *simplest* explanation for God's relationship to creation is that God made it all, and it is very good. We are the image and likeness of God. Despite our wild conviction that this cannot be true, it is consistently the simplest explanation of God and God's creation. And if it is true, then Christ, the *Word* of God, is able to save us from thinking, fearing, and believing the opposite perspective.

Christ's salvation rescues us from our mistakes and corrects them the same way the science of mathematics rescues us from mistakes and corrects them. It turns our thinking from the mistaken *view* to see more accurately God's kingdom come. In Christian thought, we need the grace of God – which

causes us to repent – to change our perspectives, to see God as the fount of living waters, and to stop trying to re-create creation ourselves.

For example, the prophetic voice of Jeremiah illustrates the difference between God's methods and the methods of people who try to fix things from their own perspective. We read in the second chapter (Jer. 2:13) "...for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken *me*, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." Our cracked cisterns that can hold no water continue to crumble as we persist in forsaking God, the fountain of living water. Christ is the corrector, though. Christ turns us, like an informed school teacher, to see the situation from God's point of view. This correction turns us from our sins, fear, ignorance, indeed, *everything* that contributes to injustice.

The critical difference between morals and the Christian correction of mistakes (sins) is where we find God. It is indeed good and right that we are kind and thoughtful. This is a moral position. But humanists deny that God is needed in order to experience moral behavior. On the basis of human opinions, we find politics, which always involves opposing viewpoints with moral people arguing opposite ideas, striving to fix things without God. Natural sciences also argue we can find truth without God. In fact, God generally gets in the way of the things of nature, except when God becomes a mere reminder that we should behave morally.

But Christ, or the Word of God, demands that God is the single *fountain* of this living water, the only cause, the one source of the water so urgently needed for life itself. In fact, we actually lose the highest and most powerful help from science when we 'forsake God' as the fountain. Science becomes dependent on human observation alone, where human brains inevitably see from the opposite perspective of what God 'sees'. This perspective, the opposite of God, says we will either all die away due to our sins and self-destruction, or we will become so arrogant, we think we have become the better substitutes for God.

What does Christ really do, then, to save our planet? I mention only four of an endless list of examples the salvific action of Christ:

1) Christ rouses us from fear, ignorance, greed, dishonesty, apathy, despair, self-righteousness, and pride because those are the temptations that make us persist in actions that harm the climate, making other people and creatures suffer. Those are the temptations that would close our eyes to the presence and reality of God's creative power.

2) Christ awakens us to see the presence and action of the Kingdom, or realm, of God here and now. As Jesus helped the crowds at the tomb of Lazarus to see what he saw, there is something else going on here and now.

3) Christ *turns* us, causing us to repent, in order to see as God sees, with love, patience, purity, unselfishness, meekness, and a desire to act on good deeds. Christ causes us to repent so severely that we change our ways. As we turn, the *Science* of Christ requires consistent reasoning from God's perspective, where we must participate in God's order, God's commands, God's love, God's wisdom,

and God's forgiveness. There is no room for selfishness, stupidity, or apathy in this love.

4) The love of Christ opens our hearts to care about the tiny Musician wrens flitting through the woods, the Fish-eating bats, the powerful hummingbirds that fly hundreds of miles to the perfect place on earth to care for their young. We love them because they teach us something more wonderful about God's kingdom than we would never understand without them. We love them as we love an infant smiling back at her parents. We love the rivers with their power to cleanse and renew. We love the trees for their fruit, their shade, and their beauty. We love generously the people who cannot afford the luxury of moving when climate threatens. We are able to love, because we have been loved. And in this love, we engage with all creatures and all creation. We are not a nuisance to others, and nature is not a nuisance to us.

Christ inspires our hope that we *will* witness the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise (Isa 11:9) that we will not hurt or destroy in God's holy mountain, because the earth will be full of the knowledge of God. This is the knowledge that guides our actions and that saves our souls as well as our planet. We cannot truly understand salvation without understanding the salvation of every tiny creature of God's creation. Salvation itself is greater *because* all God's creatures are truly blessed and necessary for our own fuller understanding of God and God's love for all.