

Joining Jesus' story with the new science story

Rich Heffern | Oct. 30, 2010



Michael Morwood

Michael Morwood is an Australian author, speaker and teacher. His first book, Tomorrow's Catholic, was declared to be "in error" by Archbishop George Pell of Melbourne, but sold well. A former priest with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Morwood works in adult faith formation in Australia and in the United States. His retreats and workshops focus on helping Christians articulate faith in Jesus in ways that resonate with a contemporary understanding of our place in the universe.

He has a master's degree in pastoral ministry from Boston College. Following his silencing by Pell, Morwood resigned from religious life and priestly ministry. He and his wife, Maria, live in Perth, Western Australia. He is also author of From Sand to Solid Ground: Questions of Faith for Modern Catholics and Is Jesus God? Finding Our Faith (Crossroad).

NCR: Your books respond to the need of contemporary Christians to understand their faith in ways that respect their secular worldview and enable them to believe in Christ and believe in themselves and our place in the universe.

Morwood: There is a growing sense of common ground between progressive Catholics and Protestants. We ask the same questions. It can be seen, for example, in the books of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong or in those of Marcus Borg. It's a plea for renewal in our interpretation of doctrine and scripture. On the Catholic side, it's a reexamination of tradition and dogma in the light of the new science story, as championed by the late Fr. Thomas Berry or cosmologist Brian Swimme.

Both sides look at underlying questions like the nature of God or who Jesus really is, in light of new understandings that come from science and elsewhere.

At the same time there is an intense clinging to old stuff on the part of the institutional church.

I see two stories about God and Jesus in scripture. One says that God is everywhere; the other that God picks and chooses where God shows up. Jesus, on the one hand, is the revelation of God with us. On the other, he had unique access to God in heaven.

The institutional church says: Don't question the story we have decided to put in. They don't know what they would do with themselves as church if they allow people to walk in these other stories. They'd lose their identity. But there are other stories faithful to our tradition; we can be Christian and walk.

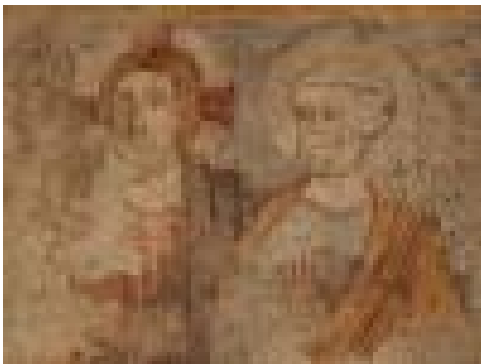
The Catholic magisterium's focus, for example, is on one particular, culturally conditioned story of creation and a fall from an original state of "paradise." Our contemporary understanding of God's activity in all places, in all times and in all peoples has to be understood and taught within that quite limited and outdated understanding. This demand is impossible to achieve. It's like trying to squeeze a beach ball into a golf ball. It's putting new wine into old wineskins and discovering that there are leaks everywhere.

The reality is that Christianity can't insist that the final word on Jesus has been spoken and that language and ideas of one century hold for all time. The Christian church has a responsibility, surely, to use the images, language and story available to it at any time in history.

The new story science tells us about our origins and place in the universe will surely be modified in time. Most of the matter that makes up our universe is still undiscovered and unknown; we do not know whether ours is the only universe, in fact. We do not know anything about life outside our own planet. We do not yet understand how the human brain works in making decisions or holding images. Future discoveries will surely bring further insights into God's creative presence and will impinge on the way we relate to the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

Christianity has nothing to lose and everything to gain by proclaiming the message of Jesus and the experience of the Pentecost, for example, in the images, language, knowledge, concerns and longings of this present new century. The task of reaching into the Jesus story and bringing its universal applications to the lived experience of people today cannot and should not be avoided.

Just look at the political situation in this country. What if our bishops preached a message of affirmation and cooperation? A political system should be based on cooperation, working for the common good and not demonizing one another and dividing. What does it mean to be neighbor, to be human expressions of the divine?



The news stories this year were full of accounts of tensions between religions. Are there images and concepts in the Gospels that draw people of different religions together?

Jesus' message to us was that anyone who lives in love lives in God. That is a very fundamental Christian understanding. In an age of disbelief, cynicism and interreligious tensions, Christians could and should be promoting this spiritual conviction as hope for the world and as common ground for religious dialogue.

But the institutional church interrupts: Well, no, only people who are baptized live in God and in the love of God. Who gains by walking in that exclusive notion?

Jesus did not say: God has locked you out; I'll get you in. "Open your eyes," he said. "The reality of God is among you; you just don't recognize it." He tried to open eyes. Even the first Jesus movement in the early church was meant to expand Judaism to more inclusiveness.

Jesus was keenly aware that we are always, everywhere connected with God. The lack of connectedness with God is not the problem but rather the lack of awareness of that connectedness

Prayer and spirituality are not about contacting something beyond us but to be aware of something that is within us. Institutional theology speaks a language of disconnection: We were separated from God by the fall. I don't believe in this disconnection story. Creation has always been infused with divine presence and energy. Look at the story of Jesus in this light. He is not about bringing the presence of God to us; he is about helping people take scales off their minds and eyes to be more aware of God's presence. Living in love is living in God.

Would Jesus himself be perplexed at the salvation theology that developed around him over the centuries?

Jesus reveals the presence of God among us. After him, institutional Christianity moved toward making Jesus alone responsible for that presence. Then came the intellectual gymnastics of determining who is he that he and he alone can bring God's presence to us. Christian theologians were busy with that task for the first two or three hundred years of Christianity's history.

Yet it's clear from the Gospels that Jesus would disown all that.

Our task is to make faith meaningful in today's world of both new knowledge and new challenges.

The fact that some Christians raise doubts and questions about a proposition that has long been considered essential to faith ought not imply that they are "losing their faith" or are in bad faith. Their expressions of disbelief accompany a normal progression in adult faith development. They are looking to have their faith based on solid reasoning and contemporary knowledge. They are searching to make their faith personally appropriated rather than reliant on blind acceptance. Church leadership needs to be able to accompany Christians in this stage of faith development rather than restricting them.

What if church leadership had gone around the world preaching that the divine is everywhere, that we humans come at that in different ways? Our world desperately needs a common story telling us that we are all living within this one mystery. The science story helps us with this. We are all pointing to one mystery. We are all embraced. Let this be our starting point.

A concept of God based on yesterday's cosmology won't speak to people. It's not my concept of God anymore, but my church is asking me to stay rooted in that old concept.

What do you see as the future of organized religion?

It can succeed as an organized way of forming people, teaching that the insights of Jesus are relevant to the questions and longings of our own time. It involves liturgy and ministry, everything the church does.

The liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas, for example, would not tell the story in terms of an incarnation from another place. We rejoice in the divine presence at work here on our planet, producing a Jesus of Nazareth who is a light to the nations.

Holy Thursday is not about setting up a new church but it's a man sharing his dreams the night before he died. Good Friday is about what you really believe when life takes you and breaks you. Where is the divine in loss, defeat and death? Pentecost is about the presence of the sacred that has always been here. All those great feasts can be seen in a new light.

Church is about telling the Jesus story, and it can be done today with renewed enthusiasm. Joined with the new science story, Jesus' story has an even greater capacity to uplift and delight us because it tells us anew of God's

Spirit at work in the wonder of creation and in the wonder of who we are.

Stories in this series

- [Seeds of the Gospel in cinema divina](#) [1], by Rose Pacatte
- [The practice of staying put](#) [2], by Rich Heffern
- [A tiny, humble peace of bread](#) [3], interview of Paul Wilkes by Thomas C. Fox
- [Joining Jesus' story with the new science story](#) [4], by Rich Heffern
- [Catholic Workers find time to dance](#) [5], by Joshua J. McElwee
- Relics, faith and truth, by William Grimm (*To be posted*)
- [Spirituality is as necessary as breath](#) [6], by Melissa Musick Nussbaum

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[3] <http://ncronline.org/node/21010>

[4] <http://ncronline.org/node/21014>

[5] <http://ncronline.org/node/21018>

[6] <http://ncronline.org/node/21017>