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O?Murchu weaves a tapestry of science and spirit

Kathleen Deignan | Mar. 13, 2013

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE SPIRIT: SCIENCE, RELIGION AND INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY
By Diarmuid O?Murchu
Published by Orbis, $22

In his latest book, *In the Beginning Was the Spirit*, Sacred Heart Missionary Fr. Diarmuid O?Murchu convenes a virtual dialogue among science, religion and indigenous spirituality. O?Murchu wants to think out loud about the potentials of the cosmic enterprise and our human agency within it, all in service of empowering others to do the same. He therefore democratizes top-shelf knowledge that is sometimes the cache of academic elites. In this latest endeavor, he again displays an amazing facility to survey broad and disparate fields of discourse and suture them into a compelling narrative with one resilient thread.

The incandescent cord weaving this tapestry is the mystery of the primordial Great Spirit, for whom O?Murchu becomes ?advocate,? pleading the Spirit?s case before us against the sacrilege of its marginalization by religion and its dismissal by science. O?Murchu appeals to the wisdom of first-nations peoples, who sustained a vibrant and expressive consciousness of the Great Spirit.

In his attempt at constructive dialogue between science and religion, O?Murchu calls upon a variety of expert witnesses to persuade his readers -- as if a jury -- to return the Great Spirit to the top of the Trinitarian triangle as divine source and field force from which the universe arises, is birthed, flares forth -- and not just the universe, but even the divine dimensions of ?God? and Jesus. This passionately argued turnabout repositions the Spirit as the original/eternal fertile and fluctuating field of everything.

O?Murchu makes his case by first giving the stand to voices from the scientific academy who offer a primer in evolutionary cosmology, delineating the contours of the universe from its primordial radiance out of an energetic vacuum redolent with vibrating strings that fluctuated life into being, and then went about entangling everything in an infinity of relationship. The good mediator then takes every opportunity to point out the pneumatological features of this scientific depiction of the cosmos, hoping to open the way for an eventual convergence of insight, should science and religion begin to learn each other?s languages.

Next he summons the voices of aboriginal wisdom in its Native American, Australian, African, Asian and even Pentecostal forms to rehearse the presence and primacy of the Great Spirit in these traditions, again with the intention to display the affinity of Spirit knowing among first-nations and poor people and the depictions of evolutionary cosmologists. However, when O?Murchu invites Christianity into the discourse, to my mind he poorly represents it, because he dismisses the emergent insights of our Judeo-Christian spiritual ancestors, who were likewise working to wield their wisdom in linguistic symbol to stammer about the fiery windstorms of the Spirit.

Lacking a consistent historical critical method, he fails to trace the creative shape-shifting and evolution of Spirit consciousness and witness as it manifests in clearly discernible waves throughout the history of the Christian tradition. As a historical theologian specialized in the history of spiritual schools and movements, I agree with Karl Rahner that Christians have been largely ?functional binarians,? focused on the ?the Father,? and ?the Son? while leaving ?the Holy Spirit? somewhere back in the Upper Room. But this is neither the whole nor the long story of the tradition in which the Spirit has been vibrantly present in our deep sacred myth.

Against O?Murchu?s charge that for Christians the Spirit only showed up at Pentecost, I invite us all to take up Luke?s Gospel. In this evangelical rendition the Spirit is the prime mover in the whole enterprise of the Incarnation (and retrospectively of creation itself), in its erotic allurement and prophetic anointing of a young Palestinian girl ever before this Holy Spirit was mediated by Jesus. Indeed, here we find a wonderful rendition of ?Spirit Christology? that plays at the provocative interface of these terms, the real gift of this book for me.

O?Murchu asks which of all the new insights gleaned from this book is the most significant. My choice is the way O?Murchu constructively spun my sense of the Trinity -- in fact, he got the principals dancing again. As he reminds us, in Orthodox Christianity, Trinity is an interfacing mystery of inexhaustible creative dynamism. But the interdisciplinary dialogue that O?Murchu confabulated triggered me to see that the Trinity actually dances through each other, utterly entangled, as our quantum friends would imply, in their ever communicating, differentiated subjectivities. This is the meaning of the theological term *perichoresis* (community of being) now: the inextricable and ineffable entanglement of the Trinity.

Likewise, O?Murchu helped me perceive Trinity as a circle all its own, challenging us in its constant oscillation in our sacred imagination and experience to let one dimension of divinity beget another and permit none of it ever to be rationally comprehended, but only poetically ?captivated,? as O?Murchu might say.

In the end, it becomes clear that this work of new pneumatology is in service of a new spiritual anthropology. O?Murchu wants the Spirit restored to its primordial primacy because such a shift in human consciousness and in the practice of life, worship and world-making is, in fact, soul-making and might just trigger the divine energies in us; it might just heal the destructive blindness of our species in this phase of our evolution. To this end, O?Murchu is clearly a reformer filled with vision and impatience -- the twin virtues of anyone who sees a more constructive and fulfilling possibility just over the horizon. He is likewise an evangelist, however much he rails against a dogma-bound Catholicism.

To his mind, science is a gospel for our time, a summons to live the vision, values and virtues that come to light at the end of a telescope or microscope. Likewise, he affirms that the wisdom of the world?s religions still bear medicine for those who suffer and are impoverished by the consumptive pathologies of the spiritually dead. One can glimpse over and over again in these pages O?Murchu the compassionate one, the man of sorrows for the sorrowing world of beings -- human and other. Deep pathos bleeds through this work, written because in this moment, it should be. For if we do not restore the Great Spirit to primacy in our religious and scientific imagination and practice, if we don?t all learn to dance together, from where shall come the gifts of creativity and courage to renew the face of the Earth?

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