

Finding Unity in the Midst of Fragmentation

In the United States and many other countries around the world today there is anxiety and fragmentation occurring and we are losing our social cohesiveness. As we enter into 2017, I would like to share some insights addressing this topic from “The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love” by Illia Delio. She points out the history of fractures that have occurred, not only among people, but also in their understanding of God and creation.

Fragmentation and God

In 1616 Cardinal Robert Bellarmine issued a statement saying that “The doctrine attributed to Copernicus (and later Galileo) that the Earth moves around the Sun, and that the Sun is stationary, and does not move from east to west is contrary to the Holy Scriptures and therefore cannot be defended or held.” When science proved that the sun was the center of the planets, the church found itself in a vulnerable position because the Bible taught that the earth was the center. Prior to Copernicus and Galileo, theology, known as the Queen of the Sciences, governed the harmonious relationship between heaven and earth. Science seemed to dislodge God from earth and God became distant and a concept defined by theologians. After this fragmentation it was only a matter of time before philosophers would proclaim that God was dead.

Pastor and philosopher Raimon Panikkar writes: “God is always God for a World. Because science has altered our understanding of creation, the ancient notions of God no longer appear convincing. One cannot go on simply repeating ‘God creator of the world,’ if the word ‘world’ has changed its meaning since that phrase was first uttered—and the word ‘creator,’ as well. With the collapse of the Ptolemaic (earth centered) universe and the rise of Heliocentrism (sun centered), the need for a creator God seemed no longer necessary, since what was once attributed to God could now be explained largely by science.” Separating God from an intimate involvement with creation was the first and primordial fragmentation.

Issac Newton (1643-1727) argued that God was like a clock maker. He set the cosmos in motion and intervened from time to time to reset the mechanism. Believing that Newton told us the truth about how the world works, we modeled our institutions on mechanistic principles. You are you and I am I. If each of us will do our parts, then the big machine should keep on humming. Our view of God came to resemble our view of the world and a further sense of fragmentation and separation occurred.

Delio points out that today our practical theology has also become mechanical and fragmented. Walk into many churches and you will hear God described as a being who behaves almost as predictably as Newton's universe. Say you believe in God and you will be saved. Sin against God and you will be condemned. Say you are sorry and you will be forgiven. Obey the law and you will be blessed. Human decisions were given a God-like power but most knew how fickle they really were, leaving them with a gnawing sense of separation and wondering if their decision was good enough.

As science developed between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, the human person was absent from the cosmic story. God was perceived as governing the world from above and the cosmos ran like a machine according to internal laws and mechanisms. While the cosmos assumed a new world picture through modern science, religion remained tied to a medieval understanding and became less and less intelligible to the modern mind.

A Way Forward

Delio states, "What took place in the life of Jesus must now take place in humankind. If Christianity is a religion of movement toward union in love—the Christ—then the church (the body of Christ) is to be a place of love and the consecration of a new way of being in love. Through kenosis (self emptying) and deeper union and relatedness, the church is to seek greater wholeness through love. It is a communal activity where separation and fragmentation is healed."

She goes on: "The greatest danger of religion is to assume any type of sovereign power, because love always lives for the other and with the other. Everything and everyone who lives in love knows this simple truth. That is why the way forward—to evolve—is inward and across boundaries of difference. God is above, below, behind, and beyond the finite because God is the divine presence in which everything is related. Love is what we feel when we become aware of our oneness with what we thought was separate from us: a person, a place, a thing, an idea."

"In our globalized era all religions can be reconstituted for the first time as de-territorialized global imagined communities. The evolution of religions toward unity-in-love speaks to a new level of religious consciousness that is more relational, communal, and earth centered. Only by this new level of convergence can religion be restored to the core of life."

She indicates that we are surrounded by pessimists who continually tell us that our world is foundering in atheism. But rather than atheism, she suggests that what our world is suffering from is and unsatisfied theism that is no longer credible because it is embedded in a Ptolemaic universe and has separated itself from Creation.

Fragmentation in Our Education System

From Delio: “The combination of Reformation theology and education fit nicely with a mechanistic world. The Reformers’ focus on sinful humanity placed a much greater emphasis on grace and the power of God to save. But God was perceived as remote and transcendent and humans trapped in a world of despair, darkness and death. Knowledge was seen as the means to exit the trap of worldly despair by creating the conditions for a new paradise. The rise of specializations in law, science, mathematics, and literature aimed to create the new Adam and a new Garden of Eden. Money, wealth, power, and success were not only signs of being blessed by God, but keys to life and happiness.”

“The university became a new Eden, the place where the world could be recreated and humankind restored to its central place in the cosmos. Perceiving the human person at the center of all knowledge (and hence center of the universe), stripped the world of its divine character and left the world of nature to fend for itself. Since the rise of the modern university, knowledge has advanced without soul, becoming power without aim. The modern university has become an obstacle to integral wholeness, insofar as it does not educate us humans to bear the universe in our beings or a consciousness that the universe bears us in its being.”

“Thomas Merton writes: ‘The university mass produces uneducated graduates who are unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and complete artificial charade which they call life. Instead of education for the flourishing of life’s wholeness, we educate to disconnect and die. Our universities have become fragmented silos of specialties. Students are encouraged to succeed in their studies, not to contemplate truth, as if success is the goal of study. If contemporary education is failing the cosmos, it is because we have lost the integral relationship between living and loving. Unless we change the way we think, we will not change the way we act. Our mechanized world of mechanized systems with mechanized humans can no longer continue. We are fragmenting fast. The beginning of a sustainable future must begin with the integral knowledge of God, self, and cosmos.’”

Technology—Fragmentation On Steroids

Professor Noreen Herzfeld from Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota discusses the prevalence of violent video games among teenage boys where one can play in the "god mode" and control life and death. She indicates that playing violent video games may be rewiring the human brain or at least enhancing those brain centers associated with violence and aggressive behavior. Children today are suffering from nature deprivation because their playground is the artificial screen. Some scholars suggest that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were driven to violently massacre their classmates at Columbine High School because of the influence of the video games Doom and Wolfenstein 3D. One psychiatrist said that their lives were most gratifying while playing in a virtual world. Addiction to violence through constant exposure to violent imagery may be desensitizing youth to violence and depersonalizing them as well. Herzfeld notes that the prevalence of cyberviolence can only exacerbate ecological destruction, as these lead increasingly to the disconnect between the human person and the natural world.

Our Participation in Fragmenting Society

It is important to understand that the fragmentation occurring in our society is also occurring in our souls. In our technological world we can live in our own "Echo Chamber". This is a new term recently coined that explains how we tell ourselves what we want to hear and call it truth. With the internet only a click away, we can filter the news we receive and create our own "reality" which we tend to believe is infallible. News feeds that we have "liked" and are displayed on our Facebook feeds make us feel good. The same is true of other news sources we consume. We choose them because they affirm our ideology and give us a feeling that we possess the Truth. But, if the Truth really be told, we don't want to know the Truth. We want to have our assumptions about life affirmed. It's called an Echo Chamber for good reasons. Whether is be from the right or left, we like the echo of our own ideology. The problem is that Truth often becomes the causality.

Our sin is Pride. Pride is always the root sin and for this we need to repent, and to show our firm commitment to amend our lives, we need to accept the fact that the Truth is found in its fullness outside our echo chamber and then do the research necessary to find it. In our increasingly fragmented world, it is up to each of us to look into our hearts and make the sacrifices necessary to find unity rather than fragmentation and seek reconciliation.

Recently, Pope Francis referred to another internet plague—"Fake News". He called it "feces". Strong words for a Pope and for good reason. A society that shuns facts is a society that contains within its own soul its destruction.

Love Overcomes Fragmentation

Delio states: "Medieval theologian Duns Scotus (1266-1308 AD) saw love and not sin as the reason for the Incarnation. Scotus looked at the larger picture of reality, not the narrow picture of human sin. He saw an intimate connection between creation and Incarnation, grounded in the infinite love of God. Love is the reason for everything that exists, and God is love. God wanted to self-express outwardly in a creature who would be a masterpiece and love God perfectly in return. Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:15, 17).

"Christ is the masterpiece of love. Because creation is centered on incarnation, every leaf, cloud, fruit, animal, and person is an outward expression of the Word of God in love. When Jesus comes as the incarnation of God, there is a perfect fit because everything has been made to resemble Christ. Sun, moon, trees, animals, and stars all have life in Christ, the personal Word of Love, through whom all things are made (cf. Jn 1:1). Christ is the perfect divine-human-cosmic communion who exemplifies the meaning and purpose of all creation, namely, the praise and glory of God in a communion of love."

Unity and love dissipate fragmentation. We see this in both nature and the teachings of Jesus. Both are revelations from God. Luther said, "Our Lord has written the promises of the resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime." Our road map forward toward more love and unity is not new: The beauty of nature and the Gospels. Our faith calls us to integrate them into our lives.

As we venture into 2017, I pray we may grow in our awareness that we are intimately connected to God, one another and creation. The scientific and technological revolutions during the past 500 years have changed the way we live and made our lives more comfortable. However, it has come at a cost. We are losing our social cohesiveness and are fragmenting. Our challenge is to have a change of consciousness and perceive our inherent unity with God, humanity and creation. May God make it so. Amen.

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