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Cosmic Christology and the Reclamation of Christ's Relevance in the 21st Century

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I. Introduction

I've been teaching tenth grade New Testament and eleventh grade World Religions for seven years, and I'm always amazed by the stark contrast in the reception these two courses receive among my students. Since I began teaching, my New Testament course has been met with universal disdain. Students are not enthusiastic about a semester dedicated to the life of Jesus and the first century-Church. My students are skeptical and, at times, downright dismissive of the course content, and they mostly struggle to identify any meaningful ways in which the life of Jesus and his teaching could impact or influence their lives in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, my World Religions class is always met with great anticipation among my eleventh grade students. My students admit they genuinely enjoy learning about the major religions of the world, and class time is filled with lively, intelligent and compelling conversation.

Upon the completion of each of my courses, I ask the students to complete an evaluation consisting of fifteen to twenty questions. Admittedly, though, I'm really only interested in the way my students respond to one of the questions: *Do you feel you have learned any new concepts that will be of importance to you later in life?*

The vast majority of the students in my World Religions course responds in the affirmative, and cite empathy, global awareness, an increased understanding of and appreciation for different cultures, the universal search for truth, and solidarity as the lessons they will take away from the course. It likely could go without saying, but most New Testament students respond with a resounding "no."

At the end of each year I'll spend a considerable amount of time lamenting over another failed New Testament class, and I'll pledge to overhaul the entire course over the summer break so that I can return to school in the fall with a course that will undoubtedly captivate their minds and change their hearts. That has yet to happen, and inevitably the overwhelming need to stroke my ego takes over. I convince myself that, after twelve years of uninterrupted Catholic education, my students have grown tired of studying Christianity, so naturally they dread New Testament as tenth graders but idealize World Religions as eleventh graders. Deep down though, I know it's an issue of relevance. The Christian story has simply become unintelligible for my students, and the importance of both Christ and being Christian in the contemporary world is increasingly difficult for them to discern.

My experiences in the classroom have provided the inspiration for

this paper. I've come to realize that addressing Christ's irrelevancy is not merely a challenge I face in the classroom, but rather is perhaps the most important issue facing Christianity in the twenty-first century. In her book *Christ in Evolution*, the Franciscan theologian and author Ilia Delio, O.S.F. posits that Christianity's survival is dependent upon its ability to formulate a Christology that both reflects and speaks to the contemporary world.¹ In this space to follow, I'll attempt to provide an academic explanation for the growing irrelevancy of Christ in the twenty-first century. Afterwards, I'll present the Cosmic Christ as the Christological formulation best suited to retrieve Christ's relevancy. Finally, I'll conclude with a discussion of a few of the possible implications involved in a shift toward Cosmic Christology in the twenty-first century.

II. The Problem of Christ's Growing Irrelevancy

The paper really began to materialize after I read the aforementioned *Christ in Evolution* by Ilia Delio. Within the text, Ilia Delio spends some time discussing the problem of Christ's irrelevancy. Within her reflection, Delio reviews some of the potential reasons for this problem that have been offered up by a few of the leading theologians in recent years. A diagnosis from the work of the theologian Ewert Cousins is among those Delio references. Cousins' theory leans heavily on the great scientific discoveries concerning the nature and origins of our universe that have been made over the last few centuries. Therefore, before Cousins' work can be adequately explained here, it's necessary to briefly review the relevant discoveries and the ways in which they've changed the way we understand the universe.

Evolution and Quantum Theory, two of the great discoveries to emerge from the scientific thought of the twentieth century, have radically changed the way we understand the universe. In *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love*, Ilia Delio, O.S.F. writes, "What makes the world in which we live specifically modern – what distinguishes it from past worlds – is evolution, a word that now defines all of science as a network of systems."² A constitutive element of an evolutionary view of the universe is the recognition that the universe in both incomplete and perpetually unfolding. "What we now know, Delio explains, "is that the universe is expanding and will continue to expand

1 Ilia Delio, O.S.F., *Christ in Evolution*. E-Book (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), location 623/4553.

2 Ilia Delio, O.S.F., *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love*. E-book. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), location 626/4418.

indefinitely into the future.”³ Nothing in nature is fixed. On the contrary, everything that exists in nature is incomplete and in constant search of greater unity, increased complexity and more being. As such, it’s now more accurate to interpret existence as dynamic becoming, rather than stable being. This new evolutionary view of the universe challenges Newton’s model of the universe as a closed mechanical loop and allows for chance, unpredictability and openness in nature. An evolutionary view of the universe also perceives an intelligence in nature, as this dynamic becoming is always toward greater complexity and increased consciousness. There is an apparent direction in nature, with the universe moving toward a goal. In this way, nature moves with purpose and cause.

Quantum Theory has transformed the way matter is understood. The work produced in this field, beginning with Einstein’s theory of relativity, dismisses the once widely held notion that nature is built upon and primarily consists of fragmentary, autonomous parts. The new quantum view of reality is marked by wholeness, interconnectedness and dependency. We now know that existence is grounded in connectivity and relationship. Separateness is an illusion. To pursue an individual existence is to commence the process of decay and death. Furthermore, created realities are not only connected, but they also actively seek out greater, more complex systems of relationship.

We’ll now return to Cousins’ work, relying heavily on the excellent summary offered by Ilia Delio in the third chapter *Christ in Evolution*. Essentially, Cousins maintains that current Christological formulations are incompatible with twenty-first century human consciousness. According to Cousins, the most prevalent Christological image presented today, the notion that Jesus, as true God and true man, actualized human potential for self-transcendence, was created by and tailored for a first axial consciousness. The problem, though, is that humanity now operates out of a second axial consciousness. For Cousins, the second axial consciousness emerges with the advent of the twenty-first century. This second axial consciousness, which Cousins describes as “global,” “communal,” “ecological” and “cosmic,” is a product of the technological innovations and advancements of the modern era.⁴ Human connectedness is more apparent than ever, and as a result, “For the first time since the appearance of human life on our planet, all of the tribes, all of the nations, all of the religions are beginning to share a common history.”⁵

The phenomenon of an evolving human consciousness has serious implications for the future of religion. Ilia Delio perfectly assesses the situation:

The second axial period challenges the religions to bring about a new integration of the spiritual and the material, of sacred energy and secular energy into a total human energy. Thus it encourages dialogue, community, and a relationship with growing awareness that each person is something of the whole. The field of quantum physics offers an understanding of the material world that radically differs from the past. Matter and energy are interrelated, and what was once under-

stood as atoms, the building blocks of matter, are now seen to be interrelated particles. From an evolutionary viewpoint, the whole of humanity emerges from a common set of proteins and, while genetically divergent, shares the same genetic materials with lower species. The “electronic mind,” the Internet, offers global connectivity and instant communication across boundaries of languages, cultures, religions and ethnicities. The advancement of technology and science, therefore, has rendered the second axial period person a global, pluralistic person, an interrelated being in search of identity and relationship. No longer is the human person content with the subjective, reflective critical awareness of the first axial period. Now one is in need of relatedness.⁶

Religion must evolve along with human consciousness if it is to have any relevance and influence. For Christianity, this evolution would consist of a reformulated Christology that is better suited to engage twenty-first century thought.

A meaningful Christological model recognizes and speaks to the defining characteristics of a culture and understands the most pressing issues. If this is true, then any relevant Christology in the twenty-first century will account for the ways in which the scientific discoveries of the last two hundred years have influenced humanity. Unfortunately, at least up to this point, Christianity has done little to indicate it’s up to the challenge. The theologian John Haught, who has dedicated a great portion of his academic career to examining the relationship between theology and religion, writes:

With rare exceptions, Christian thought has not yet looked carefully at the dramatic implications of evolutionary biology and astrophysics for our understanding of God and the world. Ecclesiastical institutions and most religious education still cling at least tacitly and sometimes literally to ancient and medieval images of a fixed universe, primordial human innocence, a historical fall, and a creator who watches over the natural world from up above.

Most theologian, it is true, allow vaguely or notionally for biological evolution and Big Bang cosmology, but they have scarcely begun to focus on, and think in depth about, the potentially explosive religion implications of the new historical understanding of the universe now taking shape in scientific thought.⁷

Instead, Christianity continues to employ an image of Christ crafted at a point in time when the world subscribed to a medieval cosmology. A view of the universe as unchanging, ordered and mechanical gave rise to our traditional understanding of Christ as static and solitary.⁸ Medieval cosmology has become increasingly unintelligible, and, consequently, Christ’s relevance for the world has become difficult to explain and defend.

If Christianity is to reclaim its relevance, it needs a new Chris-

3 Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, location 756.

4 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 570.

5 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 559-570.

6 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 578.

7 John F. Haught, “Teilhard de Chardin: Theology for an Unfinished Universe,” in *From Teilhard to Omega: Co-Creating an Unfinished Universe*, E-book, ed. Ilia Delio, O.S.F. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014): location 201.

8 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 3194.

tological model. In the next section, I'll attempt to present the "Cosmic Christ" as the Christological rendering best suited to articulate the meaning of Christ in an evolutionary universe. I'll begin by briefly tracing the historical development of this image, then, relying heavily on the contributions of the Franciscan intellectual tradition, I'll layout the defining elements of this model. The section will conclude with a discussion of some of the ways in which the Cosmic Christ complements an evolutionary view of the universe/second axial consciousness.

III. Cosmic Christology and Its Compatibility with 21st Century Scientific Thought and Consciousness

Development of Cosmic Christology

While this section will not attempt to present the complete history of Cosmic Christology, it is worth noting that Cosmic Christology is not incompatible with sacred scriptures. Several New Testament texts, which include, but are not limited to, John's Prologue, 1 John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15-20, and Ephesians 1:3-14, provide evidence that even the earliest followers of Jesus sensed that the significance of his life far surpassed his time on earth. These texts indicate a discernible evolution of faith among the earliest members of the Christian community. The meaning of faith among first century believers seemingly shifted from an encounter of the historical Jesus to a belief that in and through Jesus the divine purpose is revealed and achieved.⁹

Belief in the cosmic significance of Christ was adopted and developed by the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers, but then fell out of favor with the rise of Western Christology. The development of Western Christology initiated a shift away from the cosmic and toward the historical-factual. Greater emphasis was placed on discussing the ways in which the historical events of Jesus' life saved, while any explorations into Jesus' place within and relationship to the universe were mostly dismissed as "mythology" and "speculation."¹⁰ Zachary Hayes explains, "The cosmic dimensions would remain in the treatment of eschatology and the final destiny of the material universe, but would play little if any role in the presentation of Christology."¹¹

Increased focus on the saving work of God began around the fourth century and continued through the medieval period, with theologians from Augustine of Hippo to Anselm of Canterbury and eventually Thomas Aquinas all agreeing that sin alone compelled God to become human. Consequently, themes such as human sinfulness, guilt and the saving work of Christ dominated Western Christological discussion.¹² Though most medieval theologians identified Adam's sin as the reason for the Incarnation, some struggled to accept the Incarnation as an entirely contingent event. Some of the more notable detractors emerged from within the Franciscan intellectual tradition. Franciscan scholars, includ-

ing Alexander of Hales (d. 1245), Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (d. 1274) and John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), returned to the works of the Eastern fathers in order to establish a relationship between creation and Incarnation. For these Franciscan theologians, the Incarnation was not merely an isolated historical event but rather the reason for creation itself. Ilia Delio explains that, in the Franciscan Christological formulation, "Christ is not accidental to or an intrusion in creation, but the inner ground of creation and its goal."¹³ The Franciscan school places the notion of becoming human as first in the mind of God, prior even to creation itself. In doing so, these Franciscan theologians successfully freed the Incarnation from its dependency on sin.¹⁴ Hayes finds it fair to claim that the work produced by the Franciscan scholars of the Medieval Period gave rise to Cosmic Christology as we know it today:

It is nonetheless true to say that the Franciscan tradition, at least in its classical authors from Alexander of Hales to Scotus, including Bonaventure, did not limit the discussion of the meaning of Christ to the reality of the cross. While the cross was always important, it was never the entire story. The tendency of theologians was to move from the story of Jesus and the cross/resurrection to the widest possible horizon. They developed a style of reflection that is today called Cosmic Christology.¹⁵

Cosmic Christology in the Franciscan Tradition

Franciscan Christology, with its emphasis on Christ's cosmic influence and primacy, is a compelling alternative to the prevailing Western Christological model and therefore merits further exploration. Admittedly, an exhaustive review of Franciscan Christology lies outside the scope of this paper. This section will limit itself to a discussion of some of the more constitutive elements of Franciscan Christology, namely Trinity, creation and its relationship to Incarnation, and the Primacy of Christ, and the inherent value of the created order. To do so, I'll rely heavily on the contributions of Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus. At the conclusion of this section, I will explore the ways in which the Cosmic Christ of Franciscan Christology complements our current understanding of the universe and second axial consciousness.

Bonaventure's unique reflections on God's triune nature and the relationship he establishes between Trinity, creation and Incarnation are his greatest contributions to Cosmic Christology.¹⁶ Any exploration of Bonaventure must begin with a review of Bonaventure's Trinitarian model because, as Ilia Delio notes, "The Trinity is the foundation upon which Bonaventure constructed his entire theological vision."¹⁷

Bonaventure understands the Trinity to be a dynamic and expressive triune community of persons-in-love.¹⁸ Although a student of Western theology, Bonaventure's model of the Trinity is rooted in the Greek patristic tradition, which emphasizes the person of

9 Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., "Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity: The Roots of Franciscan Christocentrism and its Implications for Today," *The Cord* 46.1 (1996): 7-8.
 10 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 966.
 11 Hayes, "Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity," 8.
 12 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 1028.

13 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 1073.
 14 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 1050-1073.
 15 Hayes, "Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity," 6.
 16 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 1105.
 17 Ilia Delio, O.S.F., *Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction to His Life, Thought, and Writings* (New York: New City Press, 2001): 40.
 18 Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, 50.

God. Within this tradition, the Trinity is understood as a structure of persons related by origin, in which each person is not defined by what it is itself, but rather by who it is in relation to another. To this patristic foundation Bonaventure adds the sixth-century writer Pseudo-Dionysius' claim that God is self-diffusive goodness, and thus is able to conclude that the Trinity is grounded in the good. While goodness constituted God's identity, it does not exhaust the meaning of the Trinity of persons. For that, Bonaventure relies on Richard of St. Victor, who in his own work identified love as the highest form of good. Identifying God as love enables one to argue for a plurality within the Godhead because for there to be love there must be relationship. Simply stated, God is either love, and therefore plural, or God is singular and something other than love. Taken one step further, Richard claims there must be three divine persons within the Godhead because the perfection of love is for the lover and the beloved to share that love with another. The two concepts of God as goodness and God as love, derived from the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and Richard of St. Victor respectively, enable Bonaventure to create a Trinitarian model marked by two characteristics, self-communicative goodness and personal love.¹⁹

Bonaventure contends that God cannot be conceived of as anything other than Trinity.²⁰ God is a relationship of triune love and cannot be known apart from these relationships. Here Bonaventure again deviates from the more familiar Western Trinitarian formulation. The traditional model, first presented by Augustine and later adopted and defended by Aquinas, insists that the three persons of the Trinity originate from the unity of divine being. Bonaventure rejects the notion that divine personhood is a derivative of divine essence, and instead equates personhood with being itself.²¹ For Bonaventure, the ground of being is relational. To be is to be with another.

The sharing of love in relationship does however give rise to a distinction of persons, and for Bonaventure, the distinction between the giver and the other who is receiver is the distinction between the Father and the Son.

Bonaventure attributes the act of giving to God the Father. The Father, in Bonaventure's Trinitarian model, is a mystery of eternal productivity. The Father is unmade and exists as the one true source and end of all things. Following the Neoplatonic theory stating that the more a being is prior, the more it is the fontal cause of production, Bonaventure envisions the unbegotten Father as the fountain fullness of self-diffusive goodness.²² The Father is infinite goodness, and the nature of goodness is diffusion of itself. Emptying then becomes the definitive dynamism of God. In other words, God is most fully God's self through the act of dynamic emptying, in which God entirely gives all that God possesses, namely infinite goodness, to another. The Father is the very act of self-emptying. The Father is the giving away. Furthermore, Bonaventure characterizes the manner of this emptying as personal

because the good given away is the highest good, love.²³

Bonaventure attributes the act of receiving to God the Son. The Father and Son share the same essence and are distinguished only by origin. The Son is secondary, though not subordinate, to the Father because the Father is unbegotten, whereas the Son is generated by the Father. Bonaventure defines the Son as the complete expression of the Father. Ilia Delio cogently summarizes Bonaventure's image of the Son, writing, "The Son is the total and complete expression of the Father because the Son is everything the Father is in one other than the Father. In the Son the Father expresses the totality of his being and the totality of what he can produce."²⁴

The Son is the Father's eternal and singular expression of the Father because the Son imitates the Father by virtue of the fact that the Son possesses all that the Father is. While the title "Son" effectively conveys the truth that the first and second Persons of the Trinity share the same essence, Bonaventure's preferred title for the second Person of the Trinity is "Word." Word is the pre-eminent title for the Son in Bonaventure's estimation because it suggests both a familiarity with the Father and emphasizes expression, which Bonaventure believes to be the definitive action of the Son. For Bonaventure, the difference between the Father and the Son is the difference between the mental word and the causal word. The mental word, or thoughts and ideas, of the Father is given expression in the Son, the causal word.²⁵ The Word is the channel through which all of the Father's expression takes place. The Father is hidden in the Son, and therefore the Son is the complete likeness and imitation of the Father because the Father can be known only through the Son.²⁶

The divine relationship finds its completion in the Holy Spirit. Delio, summarizing Bonaventure's model, explains, "The perfection of love requires three persons - the source of the love (the Father), the emanation of love proceeding from pure liberality (the Son), and the sharing of that love which proceeds as an act of the will (the Spirit)."²⁷ The Spirit is the offspring of mutual love shared between the Father and the Son. The Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son.

Bonaventure's theology of creation is best understood as an extension of his concept of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Bonaventure describes creation, according to Ilia Delio, as a "limited expression of the infinite and dynamic love between the Father and the Son, emerging out of this relationship and exploding into 'a thousand forms' in the universe."²⁸ The entirety of Trinitarian life overflows into the world, grounding all of created reality in the self-communicative love of God. Each created reality is a finite and limited expression of the one inner Word of God. Delio continues, "The entire created world, therefore, is an objectification of that one inner Word; it is like an external Word that gives public expression to the inner Word of God's self

19 Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, 40-43.

20 Ilia, Delio, O.S.F., "Bonaventure's Metaphysics of the Good," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 231.

21 Ilia Delio, O.S.F., "Is Creation Eternal?," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 283-285.

22 Ilia Delio, O.S.F., *Crucified Love: Bonaventure's Mysticism of the Crucified Christ* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998): 30.

23 Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, 45.

24 Delio, *Crucified Love*, 32.

25 Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, 46.

26 Delio, "Metaphysics of the Good," 238.

27 Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*, 49.

28 Ilia Delio, O.S.F., "Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 12.

- awareness.”²⁹

Like Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus realized that created reality makes little sense apart from God. Intimate union characterizes God's inner life, and this union becomes the blueprint for all of God's activity outside of God's self. The two pillars of Scotus' doctrine of creation are contingency and the freedom of God. Scotus differentiates between God's activity within God's self and God's activity outside of God's self. Since God's essence is love, God is compelled to share love within God's self, which God accomplishes through God's triune identity. Conversely, God is not required to act outside of God's self, and therefore all of God's external activity, specifically God's creativity, is the result of a free choice on the part of God. Simply put, Trinity is what God must do, but creation is what God chooses to do. Furthermore, to correctly understand creation, it's essential that one acknowledge God's absolute freedom. Nothing about a created thing requires its existence. At the very core of every created item is the truth that it exists when it could otherwise not.³⁰ All of creation is dependent upon God for its existence.³¹

If it's true that creation is contingent, then it's impossible to claim that anything existing within the created order is unnecessary. Delio explains that in Scotus' theology of creation, nothing is “accidental,” “excessive,” “worthless,” or “trivial.”³² If all is necessary, then what exists must exist for a reason. Scotus believed a particular thing exists because God freely chose to create it. Stated more plainly, of all the infinite possibilities, this particular created order and all that it contains exists because God wills for it to exist.³³ Scotus concluded, then, that the existence of all created reality is both contingent and intentional. Created reality possesses nothing that necessitates its existence; rather, all exists because God freely chooses for it to exist. Furthermore, since creation need not exist yet does in fact exist, Scotus deemed it logical to assert that it exists for a reason.

If creation exists for a reason, the next logical question becomes, “What is the reason for creation's existence?” It's impossible to understand Scotus' view of creation without giving adequate attention to his insight into why God creates. In fact, the “why” of creation was the more compelling question in Scotus' estimation. Here, Scotus echoes Bonaventure when he insists that God creates because God is the perfect lover, and the perfect lover is not selfish or jealous but generous and generative. Thus God creates because God wishes for others to have God's love in themselves. In this way, God's activity outside of the Godhead is nothing other than an extension of God's internal exchange of love. God's creative work is the manifestation of God's desire for others to experience his love.³⁴ God chooses to create simply because God wills to

extend love to others, to create “co-lovers.”³⁵

Implicit in the notion of a purposeful creation is the belief that creation has a goal or end. Complete communion is Scotus' interpretation of God's eschatological vision.³⁶ Before God created anything at all, God envisioned union in love as creation's final end. To accomplish this goal, God creates the world, but creation is only the first part of God's plan. The Incarnation, God entering into God's own creation, is the defining element of God's plan, and the means by which God ultimately accomplishes his vision.³⁷

Like many of the Franciscan theologians who preceded him, Scotus rejected the notion that the Incarnation was God's response to human weakness, or a remedy for sin. Instead, Scotus insisted that the Incarnation was always God's intention, an idea present within God's mind from the very beginning. This notion is known as the doctrine of the Primacy of Christ. Ilia Delio succinctly summarizes Scotus' doctrine of the primacy of Christ:

Scotus maintains that God became human in Jesus out of love (rather than because of human sin) because God wanted to express God's self in a creature who would be a masterpiece and who would love God perfectly in return...Christ is the first in God's intention to love. Creation is not an independent act of divine love that was, incidentally, followed up by divine self-revelation in the covenant. Rather, the divine desire to become incarnate was part of the overall plan or order of intention...The idea that all of creation is made for Christ means that for Christ to come about there had to be creation, and, in this creation there had to be beings capable of understanding and freely responding to divine initiative. Creation was only a prelude to a much fuller manifestation of divine goodness, namely, the Incarnation.³⁸

Before God created anything, God chose Incarnation to be the means by which God would accomplish the communion God envisioned. Ilia Delio continues:

For Scotus, therefore, the Incarnation takes place in light of God's glory and not in light of any sin which might be committed prior to the Incarnation. The Incarnation represents not a divine response to a human need for salvation but instead the divine intention from all eternity to raise human nature to the highest point of glory by uniting it with divine nature.³⁹

Unlike many of the medieval theologians who framed the Incarnation as a conditional act in response to humanity's Fall, Scotus presented the Incarnation as a necessary act. If God wanted to unite all in a communion of love, God would need to become Incarnate.⁴⁰ Dawn Nothwehr offers a helpful analogy to explain Scotus' belief that God intended the Incarnation from the begin-

29 Delio, “Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ,” 13.

30 Daniel P. Horan, O.F.M., “Praying With the Subtle Doctor: Toward a Contemporary Scotistic Spirituality,” *The Cord* 58.3 (July-Sept 2008): 240.

31 Dawn M. Nothwehr, O.S.F., *The Franciscan View of the Human Person: Some Central Elements*, Franciscan Heritage Series 3 (2005): 46.

32 Ilia Delio, O.S.F., *A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World*, Franciscan Heritage Series 2 (2003): 38-39.

33 Mary Elizabeth Ingham, C.S.J., *Scotus for Dunces: An Introduction to the Subtle Doctor* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2003), 41.

34 Allan Wolter, O.F.M., “Scotus' Eschatology: Some Reflections,” in *That Others May Know and Love – In Honor of Zachary Hayes, O.F.M.*, ed. Michael F. Cusato, O.F.M. and F. Edward Coughlin, O.F.M. (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1997), 320-321.

35 Ingham, *Scotus for Dunces*, 49.

36 Wolter, 339.

37 Mary Elizabeth Ingham, C.S.J., “John Duns Scotus: An Integrated Vision,” in *The History of Franciscan Theology*, ed. Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M., (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2007), 231.

38 Delio, *A Franciscan View of Creation*, 34.

39 Delio, “Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ,” 9.

40 Horan, “Praying with the Subtle Doctor,” 232.

ning. Nothwehr writes:

Like a diligent artist who envisions a landscape and who then begins to execute the design by creating the background that will support the whole work, so too, before the beginning of time, Scotus contends, God freely planned the Incarnation.⁴¹

The Incarnation is the blueprint for all of creation. The entirety of creation is modeled after Christ, all is designed according to the union of the infinite and finite achieved in Christ, and creation is destined for that same union.

For Scotus, Christ not only embodies the union that God envisions for creation, Christ also acts as mediator of that union. Through the Incarnation, God reveals divine love and invites creation to participate in that love by becoming Christ-like. Creation's evolution is best characterized as a process of christification, whereby communion with God is achieved through imitation of Christ.⁴² Ideally, each created reality first encounters the love of the Incarnate God personally, then, in one's own life, becomes that love for others.⁴³ Each created reality reaches its fullest potential by receiving and returning God's love to the highest degree its particular nature allows.

Taken together, contingency, God's freedom, God's eschatological vision and the Primacy of Christ enabled Scotus to formulate a positive assessment of created reality. Each and every thing possesses and inherent value and dignity, a truth Scotus discussed extensively in his theory of individuation. The definitive element of Scotus theory of individuation was the principle of haecceitas, literally "this-ness." Haecceitas is grounded in the dignity each thing inherently possesses because it has been willed into being and sustained by God. Within medieval philosophy, it was common practice to develop a definition of an individual thing's identity by listing what that particular thing was not. However, Scotus deviated from this model and instead chose to more positively frame the identity of a created thing, to speak of a thing in terms of its haecceitas. For Scotus, each created reality is a "this" and not merely a "not that." Each creature possesses a particular identity unique to itself, each item of creation is a "once in eternity" event never to be repeated. Mary Beth Ingham succinctly captures Scotus' notion, defining haecceitas as "the ultimate reality of any being known to God alone."⁴⁴ One's this-ness is more than one's nature or personality, and it can never be reproduced or copied. Ingham continues, "We can never identify, exhaust, define or list the qualities, properties and characteristics that make up a particular individual, because they are one of a kind in that person."⁴⁵

Through his principle of haecceitas, Scotus affirmed the value and dignity of the created order. Created items are not lacking or deficient. They do not need to acquire value; rather, each possesses an inherent goodness from the very beginning. Daniel Horan perfectly captures Scotus' positive view of creation when he writes:

It is not what we do, what we have, or how we act that makes us loved by God and worthy of love from others. Rather, it is who we are – individually created, willed and loved into being by God – that is the source of our dignity and value.⁴⁶

Not only does Scotus' theory of haecceitas defend the dignity of created things, but it also has implications for our efforts to know God more fully. If each created thing is a once in eternity event, then each created thing has the ability to reveal God in a unique way. Each work of art, in its particularity, reveals something about the artist. Ilia Delio explains, "Things are God-like in their specificity."⁴⁷ Each and every thing manifests God simply by being itself.

Cosmic Christology's Compatibility with an Evolutionary View of the Universe/Second Axial Consciousness

Previously, this paper identified Christ's irrelevance in the modern world as the most serious threat to Christianity today. To this point, Christianity has mostly failed to articulate the importance of Christ in the twenty-first century. The second axial person of the twenty-first century seeks relationship, improvement and integration, and, quite simply, traditional formulations of Jesus as the individual superhero with us playing the role of the lowly spectators to the divine drama no longer carry any significance.⁴⁸ Having now examined the major elements of Cosmic Christology, I'll attempt to highlight five of the ways in which Cosmic Christology complements an evolutionary view of the universe and second axial consciousness. The section will only serve as a basic sketch, but, with that being said, I do find the prospective relationship to be exciting and full of possibility.

1. Big Bang theory posits that the universe can be traced back to a single point. As such, all created reality shares a source of origin. Despite the diversity and multiplicity found in nature, all of creation is linked together by its shared starting point. Does not Bonaventure's Trinitarian formulation, then, seem entirely compatible with Big Bang science? According to Bonaventure, the infinite love of the Father overflows from within the inner life of the Trinity, rendering creation an external extension of the single act of the Father loving the Son. Moreover, Bonaventure's understanding of the Father as infinitely fecund pairs well with our new understanding of the universe as unfinished and in a state of expansion.⁴⁹
2. The importance of relationship is another point of compatibility. The most recent scientific discoveries describe the cosmos as a complex web of relationships in perpetual search of greater union. For Bonaventure, the Trinity is most accurately understood as a relationship. And furthermore, the Trinity, a triune unity of persons in love, is the blueprint of creation. Delio writes, "Franciscan theology helps us appreciate that Trinity means God is relational, self-communicative, and personal love. God is a com-

41 Nothwehr, 53.

42 Nothwehr, 53-54.

43 Horan, "Praying with the Subtle Doctor," 234.

44 Ingham, *Scotus of Dunceas*, 54.

45 Ingham, *Scotus of Dunceas*, 53.

46 Horan, "Praying With the Subtle Doctor," 237.

47 Delio, *A Franciscan View of Creation*, 39.

48 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 3189.

49 Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., "Is Creation a Window to the Divine? A Bonaventurian Response," in *Franciscans and Creation: What is our Responsibility*, ed. Elise Saggau, O.S.F. (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2003), 94.

munion of persons in love. Because God is relational, relationship is at the heart of Christ who, as divine Word, is the center of the Trinity and hence center of creation.”⁵⁰ From a Christian perspective, then, created reality’s inherent desire for greater union mirrors the divine union of the Father and Son through the Spirit.

3. Additionally, we now know that as nature evolves it becomes increasingly complex. The universe is expanding, and as it expands, it is becoming something more, something greater and more complicated than it was previously. The truth of complexification could be related to the idea that creation has a goal, a notion Bonaventure and Scotus held in common. Both Franciscans understood complete union in love to be God’s vision for creation from the beginning. In this way, God is not distant and removed from creation, but actively and intimately involved, drawing creation toward greater union with God’s self. The explanation set forth by Bonaventure and Scotus allows for development and growth in creation. Hayes explains:

[This world] is a world that at its deepest level is marked by the radical potential to receive the deepest sort of self-communication of the mystery of the divine love into itself. Through its response to that divine self-communication, it becomes a created lover of the Uncreated Lover. According to Bonaventure, the deepest truth about the created world is that it has within itself the potential to become, through God’s grace something of what has already come to be in the mystery of Christ. Paraphrasing Bonaventure’s formulation, what has happened between God and the world in Christ points to the future of the cosmos. It is a future that involves the radical transformation of created reality through the unitive power of God’s creative love.⁵¹

God’s design is for creation to become something greater as it makes itself more open and receptive to God’s invitation to participation in the divine relationship.

4. *Holon*, a term coined by the twentieth-century author Arthur Koestler, is used to describe a created reality’s existence as a self-complete whole, and, simultaneously, a dependent part of greater whole. The word holon is a combination of the Greek “holos” meaning whole with the suffix “on” which suggests a particle, or part. A holon, then, is a whole-part. The idea of holons has been used as a new way to perceive the hierarchies that exist in nature. In the traditional understanding of hierarchy, rank, power and seniority are used to compare and distinguish between its members. But in a holarchy, “each person’s value comes from his or her individuality and uniqueness and the capacity to engage and interact with others to make the fruits of that uniqueness available.”⁵² This new way of defining identity and determining value may provide an opportunity to utilize Scotus’ oft-overlooked doctrine of haecceitas. For Scotus, each created reality is a “this,” a distinct, one-in-eternity creation of God with inherent value because it reveals God in its uniqueness. Each created reality is a whole insofar as it reveals God in a never to be repeated way. Each created reality, though, is also a part, one of the many metaphorical brushstrokes

the Divine Artist employs to create the one cosmic work of art, the universe. In this way, the value of each element of creation is derived both from its ability to uniquely reveal God and from the place it holds and role it plays in the larger whole.

5. The Franciscan doctrine of the primacy of Christ is perhaps the most intriguing connection to be made because the primacy of Christ offers a direction for evolution.⁵³ The discovery that all of life, including human existence, emerges from the chemical processes that are operative throughout the cosmos has resulted in the widespread opinion that existence is random, purposeless and ambiguous. From a Christian perspective, we need not fear that evolution is meaningless or accidental. The doctrine of Christ’s predestination insures that the changes, growth and development occurring in nature are purposeful and structured. The universe is moving toward a goal. God envisioned this goal from the beginning, and through Christ this goal is both revealed and achieved. Hayes writes:

God creates so that Christ may come into existence. So that Christ may exist, there must be a human race. But a human race needs a place in which to live. So it is that, for Bonaventure and Scotus, a cosmos without Christ is a cosmos without its head. It is like an arch without its keystone. It simply does not hold together. But with Christ, all the lines of energy are coordinated and unified; all comes together in unity and coherence; and all is finally brought to its destiny with God.⁵⁴

Without Christ, the universe’s direction is unintelligible. When Christ’s predestination is read into the cosmos, though, it is clear that the universe is becoming something greater than it is now, and evolution is the method by which God achieves the purpose for the universe that God had in mind from the very beginning. “Christ is the purpose of this universe and the model of what is intended for the universe, that is, union and transformation in God.”⁵⁵

I’d like to reiterate that the five connections listed above are not to be received as an exhaustive list. Instead, the intention of the list is simply to illustrate that there are discernible connections between the evolutionary view/second axial consciousness and Cosmic Christology. Having now explored Cosmic Christology and its potential compatibility with an evolutionary view/second axial consciousness, the paper will turn its attention to a discussion of some of the implications of adopting and employing the Cosmic Christ as the predominant Christological model in the twenty-first century.

IV. Implications

1. In *A Window to the Divine: Creation Theology*, Zachary Hayes insists that Christianity theology must deal with the shift in worldview that has taken place as a result of the scientific discoveries about the origins and nature of the universe. Hayes states, quite simply I might add, “A changed experience of the world

50 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 1236.

51 Hayes, “Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity,” 12.

52 Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, location 923.

53 Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, location 2699.

54 Hayes, “Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity,” 13.

55 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, 1236.

requires a change in theology.”⁵⁶ Scientifically, we live in a world marked by change and novelty, but religiously our world appears fixed and unchanging. For believers, this has caused what Hayes calls a spiritual schizophrenia,” a state in which “believers see the world through one pair of glasses religiously and through another pair in terms of the rest of life experiences.”⁵⁷

The modern era is the first era with a clear understanding of how the world began, and this knowledge has deeply affected all fields of Christian theology, but none more so than creation theology, the theology that specifically deals with the origins and nature of the cosmos. Traditional creation theology has become mostly irrelevant because it’s unintelligible as currently constructed. It requires the twenty-first century person to be medieval or pre-medieval in the world of faith.⁵⁸ Adopting Cosmic Christology as the basis for creation theology, though, might provide the language needed to reformulate a creation theology that best suits the sensibilities of an era heavily influenced by the scientific discoveries of the past two hundred years.

Traditional readings of Christian creation myths present a finished universe with Adam representing the perfect, complete human being. However, we now know that the universe is not fixed or finished, but rather is in a constant state of flux and growth. Also, an evolutionary view of human origins indicates that the human species improves as it evolves. The doctrine of Original Sin, built upon the premise of a fallen humanity, only adds to the problem. Without compromising the creative nature of God or the harmfulness of sin, Cosmic Christology could articulate a more comprehensible and helpful creation theology. According to Cosmic Christology, God creates the universe, but it is an unfinished universe which God gradually leads to the goal God has in mind for it. The goal, specifically union with God in love, is revealed in and through Christ. God moves the universe towards its goal by offering grace, or the possibility of greater relationship and union, at every stage.

Sin, then, is best understood as our failure to accept God’s offer of greater union and intensified being. Sin is not a lost possession, but is more properly understood as “a failure to move toward the only future God intends for us.”⁵⁹ Sin becomes an issue of relatedness and growth, which is entirely compatible with an evolutionary view of the universe and the human person. Sin is a refusal to change and become something more, something greater. Delio writes, “Sin is living in the exile of un-relatedness.”⁶⁰ Original Sin is not the loss of greatness, it’s the fear of accepting our true greatness. Christ’s glory is meant to be ours as well, but we must be open to transformation, we must be open to our possibility. Delio continues, “We are created with the capacity for God, but we resist our desire to be like God because we resist conversion – so we create our own gods, which increase our loneliness and separation.”⁶¹

Adopting Cosmic Christology could retrieve Christian creation theology from the trash heap of irrelevant, discounted myths and place it directly in the center of conversations about the future of the cosmos. Cosmic Christology provides the universe with a direction. Christ is the end toward which God creates, and movement toward that goal in part depends upon the human person’s ability to overcome the temptation to live an individual, separate existence and instead live in the truth of relatedness.

2. Explaining and defending the importance of Christ has become more challenging in the face of growing religious pluralism. Two-thirds of the world’s population is non-Christian. It’s true to say that Christ reveals God, but God is the God of all creation, and God reveals God’s self in a myriad of ways. It’s become increasingly more difficult to present Christ as anything more than one of the many paths that lead to the summit. The predominant Christological formulations of the day struggle because they are tribal in scope and present a Jesus whose influence is too narrow and limited. For a Christological formulation to be influential today, it must be broad and speak to all people, not just Christians. The “Cosmic Christ” certainly satisfies this prerequisite.

Cosmic Christology is especially effective because the Cosmic Christ not only reveals to us who God is, but also reveals to us who we are. The Christ of Cosmic Christology is so much more than the image of a white European male who has become synonymous with Western Christology. The Cosmic Christ, according to Delio, “is the symbol of what human beings really are and what is intended for all creation.”⁶² To reflect upon Christ’s own resurrection and glorification is to catch a glimpse of the destiny God intends for us. Delio describes the historical life of Jesus as a “divine Big Bang” in the history of the universe.⁶³ The Incarnation reveals to humanity its true identity, that is, matter with the potential for spirit. As humanity evolves, it becomes more Christ-like, which is to say, it becomes more God-like. In this way, Christ is not the exception to humanity but the expectation.

Christ not only reveals our destiny, but shows the way to achieve that destiny as well. This way, as revealed by Christ, does not require that we somehow overcome the limitations of the human condition. Quite the contrary, Christ reveals that salvation is nothing other than the actualization of humanity’s unfathomable potential for union with God. We become Christ-like by becoming more human, by opening ourselves to the possibilities of more life and more being that come from our willingness to enter more fully into relationship with God and creation. The Franciscan Gabriele Ühlein, O.S.F, speaks to this very notion when she writes, “When I contemplate the Christ-life, I contemplate the fullest life that is possible...The gospel life, that is, the revelation of God-with-us, is no less than my life in its fullest possible truth. Love loving.”⁶⁴

The Christ of Cosmic Christology reveals God, but perhaps more importantly, the Cosmic Christ reveals and represents the identity, meaning and destiny of the human person. In doing so, the Cosmic Christ emerges as the Christological formulation

56 Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., *A Window to the Divine: Creation Theology*, (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2009), 32.

57 Hayes, *A Window to the Divine*, 8-9.

58 Hayes, *A Window to the Divine*, 32.

59 Hayes, *A Window to the Divine*, 62.

60 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 2370

61 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 2839

62 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 2377.

63 Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, location 2350.

64 Gabriele Ühlein, O.S.F., “Facing the Christ Incarnate: An Experience in Living Christology,” *The Cord* 48.2 (1998): 58

best equipped to articulate Christ's relevance in the twenty-first century.

3. It is no secret that humankind has inflicted serious harm upon the environment. While Christians are not the sole perpetrators, they are also not undeserving of blame. Christianity has harbored skepticism of the natural world for some time now. In his essay "Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe," theologian John F. Haught shows that Christianity's detachment from and disinterest in the natural world is the result of a number of converging factors. On the one hand, faith in the "next world" has weakened any feeling of responsibility for this world.⁶⁵ We seem to be willing to allow this world to crumble because of our trust in the future "new creation" God has promised. Additionally, the influence of the philosophy of the Axial Age cannot be overlooked. During the era, the belief emerged that the fulfillment of human destiny required a withdrawal from this world. We became merely pilgrims or visitors in this world, always seeking to escape this temporal existence.⁶⁶ Overtime, detachment from the material world became a constitutive element of an authentically religious life. Haught admits modern Christian theology has done little to repair the divide between humanity and nature. Most contemporary theologians in the modern era appear content to leave issues of the natural world to science.⁶⁷

Haught smartly recognizes that the discovery of evolution and subsequent realization that the universe is unfinished presents Christianity with an opportunity to resituate human restlessness within the larger picture of the cosmos' own journey toward completion.⁶⁸ The human search for transcendence is nothing other than an extension of the universe's own desire for completion. Here Cosmic Christology becomes helpful. An essential component of Cosmic Christology is the belief that God creates with a goal in mind. The universe is not aimless but headed toward a goal that God has had in mind since the beginning. Furthermore, God's vision for a completed creation is not limited to human beings but includes the entire cosmos. Gabriele Uehlein writes, "It could never be the intent of the God who birthed creation in love to discard eventually the physical cosmos."⁶⁹ The human person would do well, then, to realize that his or her own search for salvation is intrinsically linked to the completion of the cosmos. Haught believes that a Christian vision that accounts for a cosmos that is in process "will lead us to strive not to get out of the world but to do what we can to shepherd this still unfinished universe toward the fulfillment of the promise that underlies and impels it toward the future."⁷⁰

Cosmic Christology provides an incentive for Christians to become more involved in the world, and this involvement need not be limited to ecological issues. An evolutionary view of the universe reveals that salvation is best understood as completion.

65 John F. Haught, "Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe," in *Franciscans and Creation: What is our Responsibility*, ed. Elise Saggau, O.S.F. (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2003), 2.
66 Haught, "Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe," 13.
67 Haught, "Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe," 14.
68 Haught, "Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe," 17.
69 Uehlein, "Facing the Christ Incarnate: An Experience in Living Christology," 58.
70 Haught, "Theology and Ecology in an Unfinished Universe," 18.

Cosmic Christology depicts completion as complete union in love with God, and the truth of Christ's own glory is evidence that we can trust this time of completion will arrive. Until that time of completion, though, we are called to be Christ-like and work to bring completion and wholeness in every facet of our lives. Delio writes:

To be Catholic is to live in conscious evolution, to be actively engaged in this unfinished universe as co-creators of justice, peace, mercy and compassion. Catholic is less what we are than what we do; catholicity is a virtue of relatedness, a dynamic energy of whole-making.⁷¹

V. Conclusion

The truth of evolution has the potential to radically change and improve the way we experience God, the world, and one another. Unfortunately, our static theology and medieval understanding of the universe precludes us from truly considering the implications in any meaningful way. Ilia Delio writes, "On the whole we are not conscious of evolution; we do not live as creatures in evolution, and we do not act as if our choices can influence the direction of evolution."⁷² I do not believe Cosmic Christology is a catch-all solution, and I admit there is still serious work to be done, but I do hope the reflection on Cosmic Christology offered above will at least demonstrate the possibilities available to us when we allow for Christ to be born anew.

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