



The Cosmic Christ

'How Miniscule this Planet'

Thomas H. Troeger

How miniscule this planet
amidst the stars at night,
a mote that floats in vastness,
mere dust that catches light,
yet, God, you count of value,
of boundless, precious worth,
all creatures who inhabit
this tiny, mite-sized earth.

Together faith and science
extend what we can see.
and amplify our wonder
at all you bring to be:
how energy and matter
have coalesced in space
as consciousness and meaning,
and hearts that yearn for grace.

And from that wonder blossoms
a wonder that exceeds
the reach of human dreaming
for meeting earth's deep needs:
the Christ, in whom all matter,
all energies cohere,
is born upon this planet
and dwelling with us here.

By Christ we are connected
to every shining star,
to every atom spinning,
to all the things that are,
and to your very being,
around, below, above,
suffusing each dimension
with light and life and love.

7.6.7.6.D.
Tune: LLANGLOFFAN

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Exploring the Cosmic Christ

An interview with the Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp

Karin Hamilton



Photo by Marc-Yves Regis

The Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp is a transitional deacon from the Episcopal Church in Maine, studying for her S.T.M. at Yale Divinity School, focusing on the cosmic Christ.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:15-17 (NRSV)

The way many Episcopalians think about Jesus is too small. Not that they're wrong, but that Jesus is more: Jesus is the Christ. And if you think that's just a redundant phrase, you're in for what could be a life-changing conversation.

The Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp is a

transitional deacon from the Episcopal Church in Maine currently pursuing a Master in Sacred Theology (S.T.M.) degree at Yale on the cosmic Christ, with a focus on applications for parish ministry.

She is a former high school science teacher who yearned to bring a more spiritual

perspective to her students so that, for example, they could see how recycling plastic honored the sacredness of God's creation. Instead, she is now doing the reverse, bringing more science into theology through teaching and learning about the cosmic Christ.

It all started with one forum on the cosmos asking, “where was Christ in all this,” using images from the Hubble telescope, drawing on her science background, and inviting discussion.

While earning her M.Div. at Yale Divinity School, Catherine Amy served her seminarian internship at St. Peter’s in Cheshire, which already had a good understanding of the sacredness of God’s creation and actively participated in related ministries. The rector, the Rev. Sandra Stayner, welcomed the opportunity to have Catherine Amy join them.

Sandy recalled noticing how Catherine Amy’s love of the outdoors (she is also a certified Maine Guide) and of science began to coalesce with her divinity school studies and in particular with her drive to explore the second person of the Trinity, realizing that all things are with God from the beginning.

“It began to be clear in her mind that the second person of the Trinity is more than the ‘human face of God’,” Sandy said, excited about watching the spiritual growth taking place. “There was a cosmic element, and she began to pursue that.”

It all started with one forum on the cosmos, recalled Catherine Amy, asking, “where was Christ in all this,” using images from the Hubble telescope, drawing on her science background, and inviting discussion. It grew over time to regular Sunday adult forums plus ongoing discussion groups.

Many in the congregation were supportive and interested in the related sermons as well as the forums and discussion groups that she led about the cosmic Christ. The questions pushed them all into deeper contemplation and reflection.

Sam Dunlop, a member of the parish who participated in the forums and discussions, said he learned there was already a basis for it in Christianity, going back to its wisdom and prophetic traditions.

“I liked that it gets at some of the mystical traditions but doesn’t command that one drop rational ideas,” he said. Still, he said, it took

him a while to get used to thinking about the cosmic Christ. “Christ not only appeared at a certain point in time ... but was present from the beginning and present across all time and space,” he said. “She [Catherine Amy] gets you to ask if there’s a divine love behind the whole thing.”

As an added benefit to their discussions, Sam noted that it transformed the way he saw the outdoors, providing what he called a broader “spiritual history” of constant change and transformation.

IN WHOM ALL THINGS HOLD TOGETHER

Catherine Amy is particularly drawn to the writing of Paul to the Colossians in Chapter 1, verses 15-20.

“Christ is described as the one through whom all things are made and in whom all things hold together, and that was my starting point ... for my own personal journey,” she said in an interview late this past August, noting that others may “fall into it” through different places in Scripture, or their own mystical experience, or through contemplation. She described it as “like when you feel something click,” like waking up, like remembering something that had been forgotten, and admitted it was very difficult to find language to describe it.

“It made me really stop and think about what I understood Christ to be, which was the human Jesus, the one who walked this earth and whose story I knew; the good news I was hearing, the passion story, the mystery of life, death, and the resurrection. All that was sort of broken open into a bigger question for me: What does it mean that Christ was before all things, before this human Jesus? I was puzzled and intrigued by the phrase, ‘all things’ because logically, and in our modern way of thinking and understanding of time — which is linear — it doesn’t really make sense.

“It’s like seeing something beautiful or artistic or hearing beautiful music,” she said, continuing to explain. “It stirs your heart and you fall into something enticing. That was my starting point, and the one I go back to.”

Next, she started to wonder why it mattered, which turned out to be profound.

“‘All things’ is a lot of things!” she said. “You can’t just think about the human story you’re thinking about the rocks and the animals and the creatures and their relationships and the whole cosmos and everything,” she said.

As she continued to explore it, Catherine Amy said she was grateful to find “mentors” who had asked the same questions and studied it more deeply. First among these for her was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. She continues to discover more and more thinkers on these matters.

IN THE NAME OF IT ALL

In the name of all
that is we come together.
In the name of the stars and galaxies;
in the name of the planets,
moons and the sun;
in the name of all that is we come.

In the name of all
that is we come together.
In the name of the oceans and the sea;
in the name of the mountain,
desert and plain;
in the name of all that is we come.

In the name of all
that is we come together.
In the name of the buffalo and bear;
in the name of the turtle,
eagle and whale;
in the name of all that is we come.

In the name of all
that is we come together.
In the name of the cactus and the fern;
in the name of the flower,
tree and herb;
in the name of all that is we come.

In the name of all
that is we come together.
In the name of the elements of life;
in the name of the soil,
water and air;
in the name of all that is we come.

In the name of all
that is we come together.
In the name of the children of earth;
in the name of the spirit
breathing in all things;
in the name of all that is we come.

"In the Name of All That Is," by Jan Novotka
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"Teilhard de Chardin was a geologist who studied evolution and understood the slow work of God through the rocks, and was a Jesuit priest and struggled in a very pioneering way to bring together evolution and matter, science and the mystery of Christ," she said.

He also served in World War I as a chaplain, and "stretcher-bearer." She marveled that some of his insight came during the war.

"It's actually where some of his cosmic vision came into place, through the suffering and the turmoil and the chaos of the trenches," she said. "You would think you'd come out of that broken and full of despair, crushed by what humans can do ... and yet [he came out of it] with heightened compassion for those who suffer. Yet this vision of his, from the darkness, was so profound and enduring. He wasn't just sitting quietly in a beautiful spot or stargazing."

As her understanding kept growing, she noticed that her language was failing to keep pace.

"The words are frustrating to me, but I see it and feel that this is the presence of God, calling to us now, in a way that invites us to see, literally, with our physical vision, the world is radiant through Christ all the time. And that it matters, it's urgent. And then [the understanding] falls into how we understand social justice and how we see 'the other' as precious, and how we see the earth as part of ourselves, and ourselves as embedded in the earth. It's become practical, for me, rather than a vision that's just theological."

"BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD"

Conversations at St. Peter's were essential to ongoing reflections. Parishioners asked about why "cosmic Christ" and not "Great Mystery" or anything referencing the Trinity. They wanted to know whether focusing on the cosmic Christ was a deterrent to conversation with people from different faith traditions. They struggled with traditional linear ways of thinking, and dualisms common in our culture.

"I guess it's hard to explain this, but to me, Jesus and the cosmic Christ are not separate," said Catherine Amy. She and the parish group looked at the prologue to the Gospel of John, who wrote about the "Word made flesh," and also to the wisdom traditions, finding what could be called an organizing principle to the universe that comes before Christianity.

"And yet Christ came into this work in a very particular moment in the mystery of God's love, and became incarnate, and that love is infinite and timeless," she said. "It's the mystery of the incarnation of matter and spirit; it's the Jesus we know, who walked the earth and who we read about through the gospels, who is this cosmic phenomenon. There's no difference, even though it feels like it doesn't fit into our linear way of thinking.

"We have so many dualisms: heaven and earth, male and female, matter and spirit, human and cosmos, human and God, young and old, mind and body, and we sort of think these are natural categories. But there is a discussion that comes sometimes through contemplative circles, or mystical writings, of non-duality, where you fall into a realm of tension between two things that you once thought were separate, but aren't. That's what the 'cosmic Christ' is doing for me. If you go into the mystery of the incarnation, it's very, very hard to understand how the human Jesus could be the cosmic Christ

because [of the] way [we're] conditioned as a modern human being[s], educated in a certain way, through separated disciplines, and the way we use metrics for progress and how we think about results.”

The parish group at St. Peter's learned more about Christianity's contemplative tradition, which she said teaches us to be quiet, empty our minds, and be still. It's there where she said she finds “moments of non-duality” that may be glimpses into a reality bigger than one she thought she knew, where the concept of the cosmic Christ makes sense; where a “resurrected life” can be experienced here and now.

Catherine Amy realizes these moments may be fleeting, yet their brevity doesn't diminish their value.

“I don't think we can always hold this vision, as we're always so distracted,” she said. “There are so many demands on our time and our energy, and many of them are very important – loved ones who need attention, for example – and we can't just sit and contemplate. But I think that when we do — and the scriptures are full of this you know, telling us to 'arise,' 'taste and see,' 'awake,' for example — the world becomes radiant, and you're part of it. We all have our moments where our hearts are still, and we have a moment of revelation. It's a very intimate moment with God.”

YOU MATTER

Just like the small moments are brief portals to something more vast, our responses can be in small actions, as well.

“When we see, we know what to do, in our own little space and time of this world, and it will be relevant to the particularity of your life,” said Catherine Amy, still struggling to find the words to adequately convey the vision.

For example, she said, you might suddenly realize that you can open up your heart to the person right next to you, to be more compassionate, or you might see your neighbor who you didn't notice before. Or, you might suddenly have the eyes to see the suffering around you and you might be willing to witness. Or, in a more mundane or more practical sense, she said, you might

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realize it actually does matter if you throw away or recycle your coffee cup, or you might think of the landfill when you walk into the grocery store and see everything so clean and sanitized and packaged, and think of where all of it is going; you might actually buy things differently.

“And you might actually think that you matter,” she said.

She’s concerned that our society focuses too much on results, on progress or products, so that these “small acts” may be too easily dismissed by people.

“Instead of saying to yourself, ‘Well, I need to go save the world today,’ or, ‘I need to solve this big problem [in the world] today,’ maybe when you fall into a moment of vision, doing the littlest things are the most profound.” she said.

She connected that back to Jesus’ teaching that the last will be first, and the first will be last. “Be kind, love your neighbor as yourself, think of those on the margins, and wake up to the little things not miles away but right around you,” she said.

“I’m struggling with the language,” she added, “but what I’m trying to describe is basically the hinge or the journey from contemplation to action. There’s some sort of mysterious moment. It’s very intimate and personal to you with your journey with God, that when it happens you know how to act. I can’t tell somebody how to act or live their life. Maybe I can walk with them if they want. I can listen.

The acknowledgment of the cosmos becomes an integral part of the narrative of God’s incarnation in Christ, allowing for growth in human spirituality, the deepening of the communion between humanity and the universe, the recognition of the preciousness of all forms of life, and, most importantly, a greater sensitivity to suffering and injustice.

Catherine Amy Kropp

But we all have that sacred inner space where God knows our true name and our true reality and 'knit us together in the womb before we were born,' and that primal sense of God. And when we’re entering into it with God our creator — with whatever language we’re using to grasp this mysterious reality — we hear God’s voice, whatever it is that God needs to say to you. And you realize you’re beautiful and loved and that everything you do matters, and you’re empowered.”

NEXT STEPS: BACK TO SCHOOL

Coming out of her experience at St. Peter’s, exploring the cosmic Christ in a parish setting, having also led a related retreat for another parish in ECCT, Catherine Amy

decided to stay a bit longer in Connecticut. She’s back at Yale, taking another year to earn her S.T.M. degree (Master of Sacred Theology) in their Religion and Ecology interdisciplinary program, in addition to the M.Div. she earned earlier, prior to her ordination to the transitional diaconate. Her advisor is Professor Mary Evelyn Tucker, a widely-known lecturer and researcher on religion and ecology and author or editor, with her husband John Grim, of related books, video, courses, and an annual forum.

Catherine Amy’s S.T.M. proposal was titled, “For the Study of the Cosmic Christ with a Focus on the Applications for Parish Ministry,” and began with this:

There is an urgent need for the study and celebration of the cosmic



GOD'S GOOD EARTH | PRAISE AND PRAYER FOR CREATION

The hymn text and the litany (also a hymn text) featured on these pages were recommended by Anne and Jeffery Rowthorn and are included in their new book to be published this November, *God's Good Earth: Praise and Prayer for Creation*, by Liturgical Press. Both widely known, respected, and published, the Rowthorns live in southeastern Connecticut and attend St. Ann's, Old Lyme. Jeffery, resigned bishop suffragan of ECCT, has written hymns and litanies and compiled related books; Anne has compiled four collections of ecological writings. Order the book and read more at litpress.org.

Christ in Christian ministry to address the social and ecological concerns within the modern culture of the United States and globally. The understanding of the cosmic Christ, the one through whom "all things hold together" (Col 1:17), offers insight into the transcendence and beauty of human existence in the body of Christ. There is also a call to action.

Without embracing the cosmic dimensions of Christianity, Christians are missing essential parts of the Christian narrative, including the immense beauty of God's creation of which they are a part, as well as an awareness of their responsibilities to each other, all creatures and to the Earth. The acknowledgment of the cosmos becomes an integral part of the narrative of God's incarnation in Christ, allowing for growth in human spirituality, the deepening of the communion between humanity and the universe, the recognition of the preciousness of all forms of life, and, most importantly, a greater sensitivity to suffering and injustice.

The result is an expanding sense of love and compassion for humanity. There is greater force and capacity to fight injustice and to help the marginalized, the weak, the poor and the persecuted; the ones through whom Christ leads us to discover the kingdom and beauty of God.

The strength of this vision also lies in its ability to inspire the preaching of the Gospel message during times that are tumultuous, when people are divided, uprooted and disconnected from each other and from the Earth. It leads people to recognize and celebrate their cosmic consciousness in the message that Christ is the one through whom God reconciles all things (Col 1:20; Phil 2:10).

Catherine Amy plans to expand upon the work she began at St. Peter's in Cheshire to develop best practices in spiritual formation; an examen; a practical guide for group explorations of the natural world; training modules; possibly a sermon series; and other ways to share the awareness of the cosmic Christ.

She concludes her S.T.M. study proposal with her hope and prayer: "With this awareness and understanding of the cosmic dimensions of Christianity, Christians can participate in the work of earthly and spiritual renewal and develop the confidence and hope with which to address the global ecological crisis."

Karin Hamilton serves as Canon for Mission Communication & Media for the Episcopal Church in Connecticut.

TO EXPLORE MORE ON THE COSMIC CHRIST, CONSIDER:

- A Buddhist monk in Thailand has been "ordaining" trees for more than two decades, wrapping them in orange clerical robes that are associated with the sacred, as a way to end the rampant deforestation taking place there.
- Trinity Retreat Center in West Cornwall held a weekend retreat on "God and the Cosmos" the weekend of the Perseid meteor shower.
- Programs and leaders from Kairos Earth and from Metanoia of Vermont.
- Yale University in New Haven offers a joint master's degree program in religion and ecology. It also offers a M.A.R. (Master of Arts in Religion) concentration in religion and ecology, holds an annual "Religion and Ecology Summit," and offers an online class open to the public, "Journey of the Universe: A Story for Our Times."
- Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim are lecturers and researchers at Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies as well as the Divinity School, co-directors of the annual summit, co-authors and co-editors of related books, and producers of the film, *Journey of the Universe*, used in the online course.
- Related concepts you may encounter in your research: cosmic Christ; eco-spirituality; deep ecology; care for creation; Christian mysticism; Christian contemplative traditions; Celtic Christianity (and Celtic consciousness)
- More writers:
 - Thomas Berry, C.P.
 - The Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault
 - Judy Cannato
 - Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ
 - Ilia Delio, OSF
 - The Rev. Matthew Fox
 - John Philip Newell
 - Richard Rohr, OFM
 - Brian Thomas Swimme

NOTES:

- Richard Rohr, OFM, has a series of meditations, and also leads conferences and programs, on the cosmic Christ. Next spring (2019) Richard Rohr, John Dominic Crossan, and Jacqui Lewis are hosting a conference, "The Universal Christ: Another name for everything."
- There are many other writers and other programs. If a group from two or more Episcopal parishes in ECCT want to develop a related ministry network, they may collect a more comprehensive set of resources for recommended study, identify retreats and workshops, etc.

