



A Reflection on Relationality A Glimpse at the Future of Humankind

Donald Frohlich

St. Thomas University, Houston, USA

In the summer of 2015 I was happy to be invited to visit the Papal Seminary in Pune in early January and, while there, to share some thoughts on spirituality and science with second year seminarians in his Philosophy of Science and Cosmology course. I am an evolutionary biologist by vocation and training, an unapologetic Neo-Darwinist, and teach an undergraduate or graduate course in Faith and Science at the University of St. Thomas in Houston Texas, yearly.

My experience in Pune was one of both surprise and joy. Spiritual writers of many faiths, and contemplatives in particular, teach us that the second half of life (I am 60 years sentient) is significantly marked by learning as a process of 'unlearning'. That observation could not have been more the case for me than in a short stay in the Papal Seminary community and in Pune itself.

An American who visits other cities at home and abroad, mostly for academic conferences and symposia, I am regularly exposed to cultures that have learned to place almost exclusively high value on the western ideal of individualism; traditionally known as 'rugged individualism' in the US (I am in no position nor have any desire to act as western or American apologist). My

own science has reinforced the same notion although admittedly very little empirical science is conducted outside of collaboration (*we* very quickly can become *I*). I was however unprepared for and touched by the encounter with the ancient, deep, and complex collage that is modern India. From the celebration of Pongal with seminarians and faculty, to a prayer service with clergy from the Syrian Orthodox church in India, to almost daily walks in the neighborhoods near the seminary I encountered the beautiful simplicity and holiness of daily life - an almost palpable individual second nature that understands the 'how' of living in a present moment despite the hustle of a rapidly modernizing economy.

Loosely quoted, Mahatma Gandhi wrote "...everything that you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it". A paradox? Indeed. But, also a statement about the uniqueness of each person in the vastness of what we increasingly know as a 'relational' universe. As children we are taught that no two snowflakes are alike, and that identical shapes are never produced. Mostly true perhaps, but physical

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measurements reveal that these are water molecules that behave strictly within the parameters of hydrogen bonding and the rules of tetrahedral lattice formation in crystals. None-the-less, those same crystals together paint a landscape of snow that can be breath taking in its awesome grandeur, or reverent in its deep silence. There is a unique identity and being-ness that emerges from the one-ing such small forms.

Anglican theologian and physicist John Polkinghorne writes “the universe is *deeply relational* (emphasis mine) in its character and unified in its structure, because it is the creation of the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”¹. On a next to last evening at the Papal Seminary I stood outside watching the sunset near a statue of the Christ with outstretched arms and bearing the Sacred Heart. Through the trees in front of me wafted the unmistakable sounds of traditional music that Americans like myself

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identify as Hindu India. At the same time, behind me, I heard the call to prayer intoned from a minaret in a Muslim neighborhood. Taken separately each is engaging enough. But experienced as one, they were a gift from the Holy Spirit in a precious and special few minutes of waning evening sunlight.

It seems to me that more than in most cultures, India’s people are quick to smile and do so broadly. The young seminarians and their mentors practically wear their happiness. Perhaps some already know much of what many of us on the planet need to unlearn. In *Laudato Si* His Holiness Pope Francis speaks of the sacredness of nature, the needs of many, and the power of few:

Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless

affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.²

India and her varied local cultures can be (and in many ways already are) a grand experiment in relationality and emergence. From its maturity and history, the Indian Church has the opportunity to teach the western world (and quickly emerging national

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economies like Cuba, and in Africa) the necessity of unlearning, the grace of relational solitude, and the value of now-ness. Indeed, India and her people are the future of the Church.

Notes

¹ *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*. 2010. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. 232 pp., Grand Rapids MI, USA.

² *Laudato Si* (84)