

Wonder

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If Christ is not risen from the dead, then it is indeed “biodegradability” which has the last word about our life. Consumer products today are often sold in wrappers or containers marked “recyclable” or “biodegradable”. Obviously, this points to a modest way out of the environmental crisis, reminding us that unless we exercise some discipline in consumption Planet Earth may become a rubbish heap with no resources for human life.

But these words inadvertently suggest some deeper truths about the nature of time and matter as well. While inviting us to harmonize with the rhythm of nature, which dies and renews itself, they provide a critique from within our civilization.

“Recycling” brings to mind the cyclical perception of time, which prevailed in many ancient cultures. This was largely rejected by the West – in the name of Judaeo-Christian tradition – in favor of a linear scheme of time and history.

“Biodegradable” evokes the corruptible nature of things. It can simply be a euphemism for death. Ironically, it hints at the degradation of the quality of life.

Beyond the shiny wrapper, these words quietly unmask the abyss of the cyclical hopelessness of history and ultimate dissolution of matter.

Beneath the Veneer

Recycling suggests that the things we produce go back to their original raw state of formlessness and re-enter a new cycle of existence with a new form. The cycle may, in principle, be repeated endlessly.

In a broader sense, nature has always been engaged in recycling matter. The cyclical character ancient philosophers attributed to time arose out of their observation of the cyclical return of the seasons and the cycles of planetary motion. Within these cycles nature endlessly composed, decomposed and then recomposed forms of matter, both organic and inorganic.

If we assume that there is no fresh input of matter from outside into our planet, every new plant, animal and human being coming into being may be labeled “recycled” in its material constitution. Every human being who is born draws on the “dead” matter of thousands and millions of human beings, plants and animals previously living on earth. Plants and animals do the same.

This shows the interconnections not only within organic life, but between “living” and “dead” matter. Yet the stunning mystery is that each of us is endowed with a distinct identity, down to the prints on the tips of our fingers. Every creature, small or great, is stamped with its own unique personality. Life eludes the rots of recycling.

The Eighth Day

With scientific speculation on time becoming more and more complex in a universe “with no edge of space-time”, as Stephen Hawking says in *A Brief History of Time*, the old image of the cycle re-emerges in the human consciousness in different ways.

Many ancient cultures represented time as turning on itself, as is shown by the cycles of the day, the week and the year.

To the early Christian theologians, the cycles of the week seemed to symbolize the meaninglessness of earthly existence taken into itself. Like the legendary Greek image of the snake swallowing its own tail, the seven day week returns to itself, repeating its cycle.

So the patristic tradition proposed “the eighth day”, which broke open the cyclical chain of seven days. The seven day week represented the history of the created world; the eighth day symbolized eternity. Sunday, the day of the resurrection of Christ, was the first and the eighth day at the same time.

Sunday is the day of the sun, the source of life, the first day of the week, and symbolically the first day of creation. It is also the eighth day, the day of the new creation, the day of resurrection, which initiated all creation to eternal life.

The eighth day breaks the monotonous cycle of time and liberates time from bondage to boredom and death. There is no longer evening or morning to mark the bounds of the day, no sun or moon to determine the course of day or night.

The eighth day, outside the weekly cycle, signals the end of the fatalistic resignation to despair built into the ever-repeating cycles of history. It implies rest from the cyclical chain of work.

Industrial civilization has been marked by the assembly line, the infernal cycle of production to which human laborers are chained. The “weekend”, which it invented to break the cycle and provide time to rest, is only the beginning of another week’s cycle.

The eighth day of resurrection breaks the chain of birth and death. (We may note here the irony that many supermarkets are chain stores – a fitting image of the new slavery which is inescapable in industrialized societies and whose tentacles are spreading quickly to the rest of the world.)

In the risen Christ, material creation enters the infinity of new life. There is no more recycling or bondage to the laws of time and space. Yet created matter is not annihilated but reconstituted according to a higher law. It is the untold possibilities for our life that are unfolded in this recomposition of matter, as shown by the resurrected Christ.

Matter does not now return to be recycled. It opens itself to the life of God, to the splendor of uncreated light. Time is permeated by Sunday, the day of light, life and joyful rest.

Time, the attribute of the cycle of birth, death and decay, now acquires a new quality and meaning in its open-ended hope in participation in God's own life.

Degrading or Upgrading?

Behind the evocative term "biodegradable" one encounters the old, "corruptible" nature of all living things.

That life is subject to death and corruption may seem too obvious even to be worth mentioning. Yet consumer products camouflage that stark truth with the neologism "biodegradable" and portray it as the fruit of a new ecological awareness. But the stamp of dissolution is on all matter. We too carry the label in our bodies unawares.

In the Christian vision of reality illuminated by the radiance of the risen Christ, however, life (bios) is ultimately not degradable, and Christian faith has to muster all its strength to rise against the death-dealing suggestion that it is.

Degrading is a lowering in rank, disgracing, depriving the dignity of what God created out of love. In the end it is a demonic rejection and negation of the very being of God and of us.

The degrading of life is rampant today; we see it in every assault on the dignity of nature, of women, of children, of the poor and powerless.

It is a crowning irony of our age that we produce things only to call them degradable – and then feel ecologically smug about it.

Indian Railways recently introduced throwaway plastic cups for catering in passenger compartments. On every cup is the legend "Deform after use" – obviously meant to safeguard hygienic standards by preventing poor people from collecting cups and selling them to soft drink vendors.

These words, signaling the triumphal entry of consumerist culture into the struggling Indian economy, are deeply disturbing. We give form only to deform.

The logical corollary of this applies to human beings, their dignity and mutual relations and to all the rest of creation. Can we deform God's creation after our own use?

A faith rooted in the resurrection of Christ can only speak of upgrading our biological life into abundant life of the Triune God. The Christian tradition speaks of transfiguring matter, not disfiguring or deforming it. That is our only real basis to combat all forms of degradation of life.

The mystery of Christ's incarnation celebrates the union of matter and spirit, body and mind, organic and inorganic spheres, the upgrading of all created nature to be a partaker in God's nature.

Christian tradition has understood the resurrection of Christ as the guarantee and the first fruits of that union. If Christ is not risen then it is degradation that reigns.

“You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment, the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. You make springs gush forth in the valleys, they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation, they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains, the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.” Psalm 103

Living Icons

The great challenge for the Christian faith is not to ignore the pain and suffering of “sentient beings” in the present frame of time we call history.

We cannot call Christian any spiritual or philosophical theory that tries to circumvent the reality of the human existence which God assumed in Christ, or any perception, however humane and committed, that limits the meaning of our faith to this historical frame.

So we make bold the affirmation “Christ is risen” in the midst of our miserable reality, waiting eagerly, together with the created universe, for liberation from the shackles of mortality and the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8:21).

In a beautiful Orthodox resurrection icon, the rising Christ holds the hands of Adam and Eve, lifting them up along with him with a joyful but firm movement from the clutches of death. The creation around exults in eagerness.

The hands of Christ and of the human couple in the icon are alike – slender and fragile, quite unlike the muscular hands of God and Adam in Michelangelo's Creation of Adam.

These are the hands of the one who tasted death and descended into Hades, into the abyss of the human condition, who has fully partaken of the biodegradability of created nature.

The church has never interpreted Christ's resurrection as an individual experience. It is the first fruits and foretaste of all creation. So the ascending movement of the Risen One gathers all-that-is to Him and sets the orientation – from degradation to the triune community.

Patristic theology affirms that Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection are to restore the image of God in humanity to its original dignity, from the distorted and degraded state of the present human condition to wholeness and beauty.

Icons try to portray the radiance of that eschatological beauty of colors available on our limited palette. They remind us that we are to be icon-painters for the whole of creation in freedom, creativity and love.

On to the living model of the living Christ, the true icon of God (Colossians 1:15), the Holy Spirit, the supreme artist, paints the image of the new creation. Human beings are called to be co-workers in this art of re-creation. Its possibilities are infinite.

As genuine art transforms our reality, it breaks into the cycle of time and lifts up humanity from all degradation of life. So sings the ancient hymn:

“Christ is risen from the dead, Trampling down death by death, Upon those in the tombs bestowing life.”

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Discussion Questions:

Do Capitalism and consumer-based culture conflict with Christianity?

Can we deform God’s creation after our own use?

What is the point of Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection?

Does the author’s connection of our theology with contemporary ecological problems make sense to you? Why or why not?