

INCARNATION: A Reflection on Our Shared, Evolving Understanding

By Terri MacKenzie, SHCJ

RE-SOURCE: Session #1 — February 2, 2023

Because of our on-going efforts to deepen our understanding of Incarnation, the metaphors we choose and translations of relevant words are of great interest to me.

For example, “heaven” in Aramaic is not a place, but the image of ‘light and sound shining through all creation.’” (Neil Douglas-Klotz, *The Our Father in Aramaic*). Picture Our Father there!

Consider “And the Word became flesh.” According to Elizabeth Johnson, the Hebrew “sarx” (flesh) applies to more than Jesus, more than humans, and includes all matter. It “encompass[es] the whole biological world and the cosmic dust of which they are composed.”

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Perhaps you have experienced this sacred Wholeness, this awareness that you are part of a divine-infused universal unity. Although the experience is beyond words, we seek them. Thich Nhat Han calls it the “web of interbeing” and Karen Barad suggests “intra-action”: “a continual process of emergence, in which nothing is certain or fixed, but is always becoming itself through its intra-action with everything else.” (See Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, Ilia Delio and many others.)

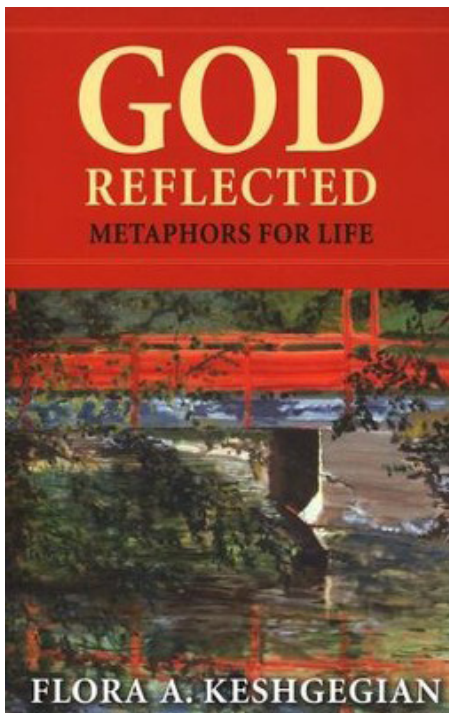
Of all the metaphors and phrases that have traveled through times, cultures and worldviews to name the nameless Mystery, most often we use “God.” When I read Brian Swimme’s *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*, I was disappointed that he had not used that word. I mentioned this to a friend who replied, “but the whole book is about God!” I needed three letters because, sadly, I had confused metaphor with reality.

The SHCJ’s 1986 general chapter, recognizing the hazards of overusing metaphors, especially masculine ones, called us to promote multiple images of God. The 1992 general chapter asked that the constitutions be written in inclusive language. The introduction to the 1994 Inclusive Language Version concludes with these words: “we encourage thinking and dialog about this important expression of our shared vision.”

This need of our time is highlighted by Irish theologian Dermot Lane in *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue: The Wisdom of Laudato Si’*. (Messenger Publications 2020) —

“The intellectual credibility — even the survival — of all religious traditions depends now on how convincingly they adapt their beliefs and aspirations to a scientifically understood universe whose special extension, temporal scale, and creative unfolding were unknown to religion’s founders and main teachers.”

Rooted in our rich history, I believe shared, evolving understanding of Incarnation can contribute to that survival!



**Book recommendation by Terri MacKenzie, SHCJ
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***God Reflected: Metaphors for Life*
Flora A. Keshgegian, Fortress Press, 2008**

As we explore our growth in understanding Incarnation, a book devoted to metaphors for God might be helpful. The beginning of this 184-page primer, written by a woman theologian and Episcopal priest, discusses “God’s will,” metaphors, and truth. Seven different metaphors each merit a chapter that includes scriptural and cultural backgrounds, ramifications, strengths and limitations. The epilogue explores discernment, cultural context, prayer and action, and power. The book includes Notes, Index, and suggestions for further reading.

A sample from the second chapter:

“Historically and still today theologians have tended to perceive God’s transcendence and immanence as opposed or in tension. ...usually, in the end, these theologians put more value on transcendence.

As a result, Christianity, the religion that claims God became incarnate in the person of Jesus, that God was present in human flesh, has remained wary of the immanence implied by incarnation. This is one of the ironies of Christian theology....

Another traditional theological affirmation is that God, the divine, is mystery. ... To say that God is mystery is to acknowledge that God is in some sense unknowable or that we cannot fully know God.

Yet, at the same time, the term communicates our desire for God, to know and be known. Mystery draws us in. What is unknown is alluring, even if somewhat unsettling. God as mystery attracts....”

How the author describes this book —

https://www.florak.org/i_god_reflected_metaphors_for_life_i_94502.htm

People often search for God's will for their lives, especially when faced with a decision, tragedy, or death. But what is meant by God's will? How does God act? How do they imagine the person and character God? This book surveys a variety of images for God, drawn from the Christian tradition and set within cultural contexts, including God as lord and master, as patriarch, as merciful father, as nurturing parent, as one who suffers with us, as one in relation, as energy for life. These are all metaphors that tell us important things about God, but do not define or confine who God is. As the chapters move through the metaphors, God's will is less about controlling action and more about encouraging life for all. Ultimately, the book redefines power, God's power and ours. "God Reflected" is helpful for those looking for new ways to imagine God and to find answers for questions about God's presence in their lives.