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Re-framing the Covenant: An Ecological Retrieval

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I come from Australia, I live in the driest State (or province) in the driest continent on this planet. Southern Australia and other parts of Australia are well known for droughts, floods and bushfires. These have become more prominent and frequent in recent decades.

In June 2015, a group of farmers from the far north of South Australia wanted to investigate what would happen if they allowed gas companies on to their properties to drill down under the earth's surface with a high pressure mixture of water, sand and chemicals to release the natural gas stored in rocks.¹ They contacted farmers in other parts of the world where they knew this process, called 'fracking', was happening. They learnt that the injected chemicals had infected drinking water. The Australian farmers travelled overseas to visit these farmers and enter into a conversation with those affected and the companies responsible for the fracking process.

This is one local example of a growing ecological awareness of what is happening on our earth and the desire to respond in care for it.

Two weeks ago Pope Francis released his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si* (LS). It concerns the care of our planet, our common home. Francis invites us to an 'ecological conversion' as we seek ways to address what is happening to the earth and those who live on it, especially the poor.

In the first instance, Francis addresses Catholics, but he also invites all people of faith to engage in an ecological dialogue about this pressing global issue (LS, 7). He presents an 'integral ecology' as the centrepiece of his response (LS, 137-162), he draws on Jewish and Christian traditions, especially our Scriptures, to give theological depth to his proposal (LS, 62-100). He employs a covenantal metaphor to describe the relationship between us and our planet, affirming the need to educate 'for the covenant between humanity and the environment' (LS, 209-215).

The timing of Francis' Encyclical at this critical global moment and the conversation that it is generating offer a fresh stimulus for interreligious dialogue. I wish to explore further this image of covenant. Specifically, I want to raise the possibility for a retrieval of the ecological vision grounded in our shared covenantal convictions. Ecological connectedness lies deep within the Jewish and Christian narrative and covenant theology. Its exploration through mutual dialogue can offer a valuable contribution to the discourse which Francis' timely Encyclical would hopefully generate.

Though time/space prevents lengthy elaboration, what unfolds below is suggestive and comes out of a Catholic-Christian perspective. I look at Pope Francis' affirmation of the Covenant in his most recent

¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2015/s4258791.htm>.

writings and explore his emphasis on God's 'revealed word' in his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Here he affirms the importance of the Jewish covenant in relation to a particular understanding of *logos* ('God's revealed word'). This leads me to suggest that a study of the *logos* in the Johannine Gospel can offer a way into an ecological retrieval of covenantal theology. Towards the end of this paper I return to the ecological implications contained within covenantal theology which offer fruit for Jewish-Christian dialogue and a contribution to human beings at this time.

Pope Francis: The Covenant and Divine Revelation as theo-logos

In one section of *Evangelium Gaudium*, Pope Francis focusses on Jewish-Christian relations, couching it in explicit covenantal terms. He links the covenant with a particular view of God. I want to explore this view a little further and retrieve the ecological earth-related implications present in covenantal understanding.

Francis writes,

We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for 'the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11.29). The Church, which shares with Jews an important part of the sacred Scriptures, looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity (cf Rom 11.16-18).²

Francis asserts that Christian faith is grounded in the covenantal faith of the Jewish people. In other words, Christians cannot understand or fathom their relationship to God revealed through Jesus without engaging the rich religious heritage of Judaism and its profound attachment to the covenant. To put this more positively, individual and communal Christian faith, by necessity, demands more than a cognitive appreciation of what the covenant *means* for Jews. Francis sees that Christian faith is actually shaped by or, to use his word, 'rooted' in Jewish covenantal faith. Such faith is fundamentally *radical* for Christians. It touches what is core, namely our relationship with God.

Francis underscores this affirmation in what follows from the above quote. He believes that Jewish-Christian faith is about God (*theos*) and God's revealed word (*logos*). It is therefore essentially *theological*. That is, it is *theo-logos*.

As Christians, we cannot consider Judaism as a foreign religion; nor do we include the Jews among those called to turn from idols and to serve the true God (cf. I Thes 1.9). With them, we believe in the *one God who acts in history*, and with them we accept his *revealed word*.³

The two key theological statements here concern our common faith in the 'one God who acts in history' and in God's 'revealed word.' I wish to explore, for a moment, the potentiality these two expressions and what they might offer for a renewed ecologically orientated covenantal theology. I particularly want to underscore the *creation* implications contained in Francis' theology about God's revelation in history and word. I shall suggest that highlighting the creation link (?) in God's salvific revelation invites us to consider the ecological implications that can be retrieved in our covenantal appreciation.

Francis' affirmation that God acts in history implies that God is located within the lived experience of human beings and within the culture and social contexts in which we find ourselves. His theological 'turn towards history' is an essential affirmation of God's embrace of humanity and communion with creation.⁴ Ecological connectedness lies at the heart of covenantal faith. It is confirmed in its various environmentally integrated and earth oriented expressions in history and captured in our biblical heritage—in the story of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 12.1-9; 15.1-21; 17.1-27), Isaac (Gen 26.1-5) and Jacob

² *Evangelium Gaudium*, 247.

³ *Evangelium Gaudium*, 247; emphasis added.

⁴ This historical 'turn' echoes the work of David Tracey and reflected in R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

(Gen 28.10-22), Moses at Sinai (Ex 24.1-11), David (2 Sam 7.1-17), and in all the other covenantal moments. In the gospels, when Jesus is depicted in the synoptic tradition as affirming the covenant in his last meal with his disciples before death, it happens with earth's elements—bread and wine. Jesus' covenantal renewal moment (which Luke describes as the 'new covenant') occurs with words spoken over earth's fruits. This meal is a summary of the ministry of Jesus and his affirmation of God's communion with creation and humanity expressed through his deeds and words. It is summed up in his primary ministerial expression about the 'Reign (*basileia*) of God'. This is the most explicit and enacted covenantal expression of this foundational earth-connected truth. God's covenantal embrace, the divine protective bond surrounding the whole cosmos, celebrates creation, revealed in Israel's story, acts within Jesus' day, and continues into our own.

All this is contained in the *theos* of Francis' statement. Thus, christology can—and returning to Francis' thought—*must* be interpreted against this rich backdrop of covenantal biblical theology, that is—to use an ecological metaphor—'grounded' or 'earthed' within Jewish faith. To date, covenantal study has primarily focused on the action of God in human history and God's intimate communion with human beings formalised in covenantal terms. Soteriology, our understanding of how God saves and redeems, has been fundamentally anthropocentric. However, within our understanding of the covenant lie wonderful ecological truths that can be retrieved.

To reinforce what I see as a deep cosmic connection with the covenant I turn to the second part of Francis' theological statement, the *revealed word* which he theologically links to the God of history. That 'revealed word' concerns, in Christian theology, the *logos*.

The *logos* of Francis differs from Benedict's use of *logos* in his discussion about inter-religious dialogue, especially with the Jews. For Benedict, *logos* concerns reason and truth. By engaging in authentic dialogue, Benedict believes that interlocutors will come to the source of truth, the Truth, the Christ. Benedict's *logos* dialogue is ultimately Christocentric.

For Francis, it would appear that dialogue is essentially *theo-logical*; it is about the God revealed in history and in the 'word.' God communicates. When reflected upon biblically and from a Hebraic perspective, this word is not simply divine speech that only a few privileged individuals hear.⁵ In the biblical tradition, the *word-deed*, the *DaBaR*, is revealed in creation; God acts and speaks within our world and its environment, through human experience and in the totality of the cosmos.

God's self-revealing Logos

It is worth considering further this *logos* dimension of Francis' words.

The God of the *logos* speaks and acts within the Jewish and Christian covenantal relationship. How this relationship is perceived has led to single, double or parallel covenant proposals. It is not my intention here to rehearse the merits or limitations of either framework.⁶ Walter Kasper has remarked that the 'relationship of Judaism and Christianity is thus so complex both historically and theologically that it cannot be reduced to one of the two theories or to a formula which is valid for all time.'⁷ However what is important is the need to re-image theologically our understanding of Jesus in a way that does not

5 On the necessity of Hebraic Christology, see Johannes-Baptist Metz, "Facing the Jews: Christian Theology After Auschwitz." in Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza and David Tracy, eds., *The Holocaust as Interruption*. Concilium 175, 5 (1984) and (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), 26-33.

6 This analysis is offered by Walter Kasper in his address at the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge, UK, 'The Relationship of the Old and the New Covenant as One of the Central Issues in Jewish-Christian Dialogue,' December 6, 2004. See <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/652-kasper04dec6-1>.

7 Kasper, 'The Relationship'.

rehearse supercessionist Christian history.⁸ Francis' divine *logos* emphasis might be helpful in this respect, especially as he affirms the *logos* in connection to the covenant and links it to God's self-revelation in history.

The Logos in the Prologue of John's Gospel

This connection of God in history and the *logos* is replete in John's Gospel (the potentially most anti-Jewish of gospels) especially in the gospel's opening verses, what is called the prologue. Through a consideration of this prologue I want to extend the anthropological foci present in the above two proposals to include the ecological dimensions. Human beings *and* creation are integral to what John Pawlikowski calls the 'divine biography' of Jesus.⁹

Scholars suggest that the Johannine prologue flags the gospel drama that will unfold in the story of Jesus, his communion with God and the rejection which he will receive as some show that they prefer darkness to light.¹⁰ Others will welcome him and become God's children—a centrepiece of the hymn. In images and attributes that echo *Sophia* in eternity and before creation, God's 'word' / *logos* pre-exists. Finally a high point in divine communion occurs when the *logos* 'becomes flesh'.

In the Johannine sense, flesh (Gk, *sarx*) is not about that epidermic layer that covers our bodies. *Sarx* is not exclusively anthropocentric—though it does include humanity, and from the Christian perspective, Jesus, the divine expression of the *logos*.

But *sarx* represents the totality of the human condition within creation. It includes everything that touches and shapes us. John asserts that it is *this* that the divine *logos* becomes. This means that creation and all that occurs in history become the means of God's self-communication. It is the primary datum of divine communion. This is God's pre-existent wisdom revealed in time. This is the covenantal God of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Leah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, David and Solomon, Jesus and Mary of Galilee, Hillel the Elder and Mar Zutra, Bonaventure and Francis of Assisi, you and me. Everything and everyone, in this Johannine conviction, has the potential to reveal the divine word. For Christians, this ecologically replete revelation is enfleshed in a particular way in the humanity of Jesus. As Francis says in *Laudato Si*,

The prologue of the Gospel of John (1-18) reveals Christ's creative work as the Divine Word (Logos). But then, unexpectedly, the prologue goes on to say that this same Word 'became flesh' (Jn 1.14). One Person of the Trinity entered into the sacred cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross. From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of the Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy. (LS, 99)

This creation perspective of *sarx* and what the *logos* becomes invites an ecological consideration of Francis' words. God is revealed in history and the word which, as I interpret the *logos* from a Johannine perspective, speaks *in* the *sarx*, not alongside the *sarx* or even *through* the *sarx*, as though one needs to look through a window in order to perceive divine reality.¹¹ Contemplation of and engagement with Creation thus becomes essential in our encounter with the divine.

8 This is the main thrust of John Pawlikowski in *Restating the Catholic Church's Relationship with the Jewish People: The Challenge of Super-Sessionary Theology*: (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013).

9 Pawlikowski, *Restating*, 79.

10 For example, G. van Belle, *Johannine Bibliography 1966-1985: A Cumulative Biography on the Fourth Gospel* (BETL 82; Leuven: University Press, 1988), 167-188; F. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 23-52.

11 R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 35.

Such appreciation also invites us to deep ecological awareness or, as Francis calls it, in *Laudato Si*, to 'ecological conversion' and to recognise what he identifies as the covenant that exists between humanity and the environment.¹² And that covenant is firmly rooted in the originating covenant that God made with the Jewish people, re-expressed and revealed in subsequent moments in history in the *sarx* of God's word *logos*. For Christians, this covenant is renewed in the *sarx* of the world as incarnated in the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth.

Conclusion

In the section which follows on from the part of *Evangelii Gaudium* that I have considered Francis' affirms that '[d]ialogue and friendship with the children of Israel are part of the life of Jesus' disciples' (EG, 248). He goes on to say,

God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word... [T]here exists...a rich complementarity which allows us to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another to mine the riches of God's word. We can also share many ethical convictions and common concern for justice and the development of peoples. (EG, 249)

Our shared ethical conviction, concern for justice and development, now, concerns what is happening to our planet and those who live on it. Francis' recent Encyclical, *Laudato Si*, and this affirmation in *Evangelii Gaudium* invite us into a mutual exploration of the covenantal understanding that is ecologically sensitive and responsible. This time of global environmental crisis has brought on a new and urgent context for Jewish-Christian engagement.

For Christians, this means exploring our christological tradition that helps to 'ground' us literally, and to see discipleship about caring for our planet in mutual collaboration with Jews. It also means that we need to allow our Jewish partners teach us about the earth-related and ecologically connected insights that come from their appreciation of the covenant in the Tanak and its Rabbinic and Talmudic interpretations. We have so much to learn as we allow ourselves to be 'blessed' by the other and seek ways to move away from an oppositional, supersessionist theological stance which has generally characterised Christian understanding of Judaism up until the declaration of *Nostra Aetate* 50 years ago, and even at times since then.

We need to retrieve the ecological implications of the covenant and understand more deeply the covenantal conviction of God's communion with humanity and creation. This is essentially what our shared belief in the covenant is about. This focus will help us see how the whole of our cosmos is intimately linked to the 'divine biography'. It will also decentre a rampant anthropocentrism that has created such environmental stress on our planet.

I return to my farmers concerned about 'fracking'. Does a mutually explored covenantal appreciation that retrieves its ecological implications have anything to offer here?

¹² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*