

THE REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE REAL WORLD

George L. Murphy, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio

Abstract: Luther's claim that divine omnipresence is communicated to Christ's human nature in the Incarnation has seemed to some Christians to compromise the genuine humanity of Christ. How can a real human body be everywhere?

I will suggest here that the presence of the risen body of Christ should be seen as an aspect of God's new creation rather than of the original creation of the world, the present order of things.

We will reflect on the use of analogy in science and in theology, and consider the possibility that some features of quantum theory and relativity might provide analogies – not demonstrations or proofs – for something like Luther's christological claim. These developments in physics may thus help us toward a better understanding of God's new creation and Christ's presence in the world today.

Introduction: I begin by apologizing for the fact that the title of my paper, while accurate as far as it goes, doesn't give a very good idea of what I plan to talk about here. That's a hazard of having to submit an abstract some five months before the paper is to be given. A more accurate title would be something like that of my last section here, "The Presence of Christ as a Sign of New Creation."

What I want to address is the question of how our scientific knowledge, can tell us anything about God's new creation. this exemplifies a recent turn in science-theology dialogue from an exclusive focus on origins to the future, protology to eschatology. The Bible speaks of "new creation," "new heavens and a new earth," and the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah 11. Even if we make allowance for the obviously figurative language of some of these promises, we still wonder how a world free from all the problems inherent in the makeup of the present one could exist. Would the lion really be a lion if it ate straw like the ox? Wouldn't the Second Law of Thermodynamics still be in effect?

Here I will only make a foray into the topic by suggesting a method for dealing with such issues and apply it to one question of interest. The method to which I refer is analogy between old and new creation. That will be applied to the question of the presence in the world of the risen Christ and, by implication, the nature of the general resurrection.

Scripture goes into no detail about God's new creation, and reflections on its properties may seem too speculative for some people. But theology involves more than just repetition of traditional doctrines. As Jesus said, "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Mt.13:52).

Luther's Controversial Proposal

Luther made the controversial claim that Jesus Christ is present throughout the universe. Not only his divinity but also his humanity "ascended far above all heavens, that he might fill all things" (Ephesians 4:10).[1] All Christians believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, an idea that unbelievers consider crazy. Yet many have rejected the idea of the omnipresence of Christ's humanity as too crazy to be true. This has been one of the historic disagreements between Lutheran and Reformed Christians.

I want to add immediately that my purpose here isn't just to rekindle an old controversy. In fact I am not going to argue here for the entirety of Luther's claim. But I will take it as a discussion starter.

Luther's proposal originated in controversies about the Lord's Supper of the 1520s. When Zwingli argued that the body of Christ couldn't be present in the sacrament because it was seated at the right hand of God, Luther responded, "The right hand of God is everywhere." [2] It is not a spatial location but a function, God's power by which all things in heaven and earth are done. This claim, labeled the "ubiquity" of Christ by the Reformed, was elaborated in terms of the communication of divine and human attributes in the Incarnation, so that divine omnipresence (Jeremiah 23:24) was thought to be communicated to Christ's human nature.

Omnipresence can, however, be understood in different ways. It need not mean that the body of Christ is everywhere at all times. Luther's insistence that it is present "in, with and under" bread and wine can be satisfied by the somewhat weaker view that Christ can be wherever he chooses to be, an idea that has been labeled "omnivolipresence" or "multivolent presence." [3] Luther himself rejected the idea of an extended local presence of Christ.

Although Calvin's view of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper was more substantial than the simple memorial idea of Zwingli, controversies between Lutheran and Reformed Christians on this matter continued. One objection to Luther's proposal was stated clearly by the sixteenth century Reformed theologian Benedictus Aretius: "The trueness of the human body brooks not ubiquity." [4] Many people would see this as common sense: If Christ's body is real, it can only be in one place at a time. Can a human have a ubiquitous body and still be human? Philip Schaff is supposed to have quipped that Luther contended for the real presence of a spiritual Christ and Calvin for the spiritual presence of a real Christ. [5]

But that is misleading. The promise of new creation, of which Christ is the first fruits, is that "it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (I Corinthians 15:44). It is not a disembodied spirit. The presence of the risen Christ should not be discussed only in terms of what we know about the present order of things because he is not part of that order. "Death no longer has dominion over him" (Romans 6:9). We should ask not if a natural body "brooks ubiquity" but whether a spiritual body, one of God's new creation, does.

Scripture gives us only slight hints things in the "new heavens and a new earth" but it will not be just replacement of the old by something utterly different. It is the transformation and fulfillment of the original, *creatio ex vetere*, creation from the old, as Polkinghorne put it. [6] So perhaps today's scientific knowledge of the world can suggest some analogies with the new world.

Analogy in Science and Theology:

Analogies can be very fruitful in both sciences and theology. While they don't constitute proofs, a similarity between a well understood phenomenon and a new one may suggest a way of describing that new situation. We might think of the way Darwin presented the idea of natural selection by way of an analogy with the artificial selection practiced by farmers and animal breeders. De Broglie's proposal that matter had wavelike properties was suggested by similarities between the behaviors of matter and light.

Analogies can also help to bridge the gap between our knowledge of the natural world and theological statements about the world,. The concept of God's cooperation with creatures in his providential work in

the world, for example, can be made more vivid by drawing an analogy between God's action and that of a human worker with some tool.[7]

And Paul gives an example that is relevant to our topic. "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" (I Corinthians 15:35) he imagines himself being asked. He replies with analogies from the natural world that bring the concept of resurrection within the scope of our experience. There are, Paul says, different celestial bodies and different kinds of flesh of living things. A seed grows into a plant that looks very different.

"It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" And it is the risen spiritual body, a body completely in tune with God, that we should think of when we speak about the presence of Christ. Can reflection on what we know about the present creation in light of the cross and resurrection of Christ then give us any hints about the new creation?

The Trueness of Bodies

It is common sense that real objects like stones, trees or humans exist only in one limited region of space at one time. But quantum theory and relativity have shown us limitations of common sense. Intuitions developed in the realm of everyday experience are unreliable guides when we try to understand things outside that realm.

Before considering new realities we should be clear about what we are seeking. Our goal cannot be a scientific explanation of Christ's presence. We must be much more modest and seek merely hints of what God's new creation, the renewal of the old, might be like.

In classical mechanics the state of a system of particles is specified by giving the position and momentum of each one but the uncertainty principle says that we can't have that precise information. In quantum theory the state of a system is given instead by a wave function that enables us to calculate probabilities for things like positions or momenta of particles. A state Ψ can be a superposition of two other states: $\Psi = (\Psi_A + \Psi_B)/\sqrt{2}$, with Ψ_A a state in which a particle has a 100% probability of being at position A and Ψ_B one in which there is a 100% probability of it being at B. Then in the state Ψ there is a 50% chance of it being at either A or B. Only if we observe the particle can we say that it is definitely at just one place.

If at one instant we could localize an electron to one place, its wave function would quickly spread out again. In addition, when particles interact their wave functions become “entangled.”[8] Even when they move apart, probabilities for their properties remain correlated. If a measurement is made on one particle, there is an effect on the second particle. There is a sense in which particles cannot be localized.

That is in the atomic realm, but what about things we can see? Does the trajectory of a baseball fly as it flies from the bat get fuzzy on its way to the outfield? It’s often said that quantum theory is “weird,” but the puzzling is not so much weirdness on the atomic scale but that we see none of these counter-intuitive effects in everyday life. As the title of a popular book on the theory puts it, Where Does the Weirdness Go?[9]

The question was posed dramatically by Schrödinger. Place a cat in a locked room with a bit of radioactive material, a Geiger counter and a bomb that will detonate if the counter detects a radioactive decay, killing the cat. Suppose there is just one atom of radioactive material and a 50% probability that it will decay in one hour. Then close the door of the room and wait.

Radioactive decay is a quantum process and the exact time that a given atom will decay can’t be predicted. At the end of the hour the state of the atom is a superposition of decayed and undecayed states with equal probabilities. We expect that on the microscopic scale but the macroscopic cat serves as a measuring instrument to tell us whether or decay has happened. Dead cat means decay and live cat means lack of it, so the state of the cat is now a 50–50 superposition of dead cat and alive cat states with equal probabilities! It’s hard even to imagine what this bizarre situation would be like. But quantum theory works very well at the microscopic level, so there must be something that we haven’t taken into account.

That something is decoherence.[10] A cat is not a simple object like an electron but a vast number of elementary particles having their own wave functions. There is not just one “live cat” state and one “dead cat” one but a huge multitude of each. Since the phase relations of the vast number of partly alive and partly dead states are random and not coherent, they average to zero when we calculate probabilities. Within a

minute fraction of a second the cat is definitely either alive or dead.

For a baseball flying toward the outfield, collisions with air molecules rather than the ball's internal makeup are crucial. The probability cloud of a macroscopic object would in any case spread by only a tiny amount in a few seconds of flight. But in principle rebounding air molecules could be observed and thus effectively measure the ball's position and speed continually. Thus the ball follows the parabolic path Galileo described 400 years ago.

Decoherence normally happens so fast that observers can't catch it in the act, but it occurs more slowly as temperatures decrease. Near absolute zero experiments with superconductors in a magnetic field confirm the reality of decoherence and, inferentially, the superposition that it destroys. This is not as dramatic as a half alive-half dead cat, but it is real.[11]

Relativity also suggests interesting possibilities. The speed of light is often seen as a cosmic speed limit but there may be exceptions. In some models of the dark energy, pressure waves would travel faster than light. In fact, in the model that now best fits the data, already suggested in 1917 by Einstein, signals in this medium would propagate instantaneously throughout the universe. Similar "exotic matter" could allow the wormholes associated with gravitationally collapsed objects to remain open, making possible transport to distant parts of the universe and even travel back in time.[12]

The Presence of Christ as a Sign of New Creation

As I noted, Luther's proposal of the omnipresence of Christ's humanity was presented in order to support his understanding of the presence of the true body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Given the history, it is certainly not going to be possible to detach the topic from sacramental issues. But it seems worthwhile to look at other implications as well.

In particular, it's natural for people to wonder how biblical promises of "new heavens and a new earth" can have any connection with our present world. While we shouldn't suggest that we can explain that in terms of present-day physics, we needn't simply say "It's a miracle."

Considering the presence of Christ provides a way to make a connection between our present understanding of the world and Christian hope for new creation.

The humanity of the risen Christ is part of new, rather than old, creation. This is never stated in so many words in the Bible but he is said to be “the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:20), and Bob Russell has described the resurrection of Jesus as “the first instantiation of a new law of nature.”[13] And while we can’t insist too precisely on the historical accuracy of all the accounts of his resurrection appearances, he does seem to have come and gone in surprising ways (including into a room whose doors were locked) and not always to have been immediately recognizable to his friends. The suggestion that he could simply be where he wished to be seems more plausible than the idea that the risen Lord was hiding in some Jerusalem cellar and snuck out when he wanted to appear to people.

This is what has sometimes been called “multivalent presence.” It is not (as one of my teachers put it) as if the body of the risen Christ were spread out through the universe like Plastic Man! Multivalent presence is more relational and dynamic than any static concept.

And in these accounts we see the first instance, not the last, of new creation. Biblical promises that we will share in his resurrection mean that in the resurrection we will have this kind of complete control of our “spiritual bodies.” It is not necessarily something unique to Jesus because of the personal union of divine and human natures – as Luther thought.

Christ is present to the universe as the risen Lord who was crucified. It is “Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified” who is no longer in the tomb but “has been raised” (Mark 16:6). Jesus’ resurrection does not end the scandal of the cross and in a way even intensifies it, for it means that the Lord is present with his people as the crucified one.[14] He is not only in majestic and beautiful features of the world but also shares its pain, loss and death. Features of the world like privation and extinction through which, by natural selection, evolution is primarily driven, are taken up by the one who, as the risen Lord, is the hope for renewal and transformation of the whole creation. 1800 years ago Irenaeus wrote,

“The Son of God was crucified for all and for everything, having traced the sign of the cross on all things.”[15]

But the analogy with quantum theory that we have glanced at here may also be relevant to a question that I alluded to near the beginning of this paper: Can the Second Law of Thermodynamics, with its statement about the dissipation of useful energy, be overcome in a new creation? There is, in fact, a very close connection between dissipation and decoherence.[16] Both are due to the coupling of the variables that describe the macroscopic state of a body with that body’s microscopic environment, whether internal or external. If somehow – somehow! – decoherence were modified significantly, dissipation would be as well.

Those who feel that this talk has been much too speculative will now be glad that they can return to the real world. I am not unsympathetic with the desire to keep feet on the ground. The present creation is the good work of the Holy Trinity, not, as the Gnostics thought, an inferior construction of some subordinate deity. It is real, not an illusion. At the same time, our hope for the full inbreaking of God’s new creation means that we look for a world that in some sense is even more real than the one on whose ground we try to keep our feet. “What can be seen is temporary,” Paul wrote, “But what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Endnotes

[1] E.g., Martin Luther, “That These Words of Christ, ‘This Is My Body,’ etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics”, pp.55–69 and “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” in Luther’s Works, Volume 37 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), p.213–230. Passages from these treatises are quoted in Articles VII and VIII of The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), The Book of Concord (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). For the topic in later Lutheran Orthodoxy see Heinrich Schmid, The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 3d ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), pp. 314–315 and 327–334. George L. Murphy, “The renewal of Creation and the Presence of Christ”, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 40.1 (2013) 5–11.

- [2] E.g., Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper”, p.214.
- [3] Tappert, “Christology and Lord’s Supper”, p.48; Joseph McLelland, “Lutheran and Reformed Debate on the Eucharist and Christology” in Marburg Revisted, p.49.
- [4] Quoted in Heinrich Heppe, Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1978), p.447.
- [5] Cited by Tappert, “Christology and Lord’s Supper”, pp.61–62.
- [6] John Polkinghorne, The Faith of a Physicist (Princeton NJ: Princeton University, 1994), p.167
- [7] Ian G. Barbour, Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), pp.305–312; George L. Murphy, The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), Chapter 6.
- [8] For a popular discussion see Amir D. Aczel, Entanglement (New York: Plume, 2003).
- [9] David Lindley, Where Does the Weirdness Go? (New York: Basic, 1996).
- [10] Lindley, Where Does the Weirdness Go?, pp.172–208. For a technical discussion see Roland Omnès, The Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), especially Chapter 7.
- [11] See, e.g., the papers in Part II, “Macroscopic Effects in Quantum Theory” in Daniel M. Greenberger (ed.), New Techniques and Ideas in Quantum Measurement Theory (New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1986).
- [12] George L. Murphy, “A Model of Cosmological Matter”, Physics Essays 15.2 (2002) 230–234,; Kip S. Thorne, Black Holes and Time Warps (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), Chapter 14; George L. Murphy, “Prolepsis and the Physics of Retrocausality”, Theology and Science 7.3 (2009) 213–223.
- [13] Robert John Russell, Cosmology, Evolution and Resurrection Hope (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora, 2006), 47.

[14] Charles B. Cousar, A Theology of the Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p.104.

[15] Irenaeus' statement in "On the Apostolic Preaching" was quoted in this form by P. Evdokimov in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18.1 (1965) 5.

[16] Omnès, The Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics, Chapters 6 and 7.

