Presidential Plenary Exploring an Ecumenical Feast of Creation

The Case for Celebrating a Feast of Creation around the Equinox

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Discussions of an ecumenical Christian festival of the Creation have been animated by relatively diverse theological perspectives. For example: would the theological emphasis of the feast fall more on the Creator, or the creation itself. or on our current anthropogenic ecological crisis. That question of theological emphasis I read as still somewhat unsettled across the various parties to the conversation.

As liturgical scholars, it may be interesting to us that while these theological questions have been in some substantial churn, the question of the date of the potential festival has been—until recently for the most part without much question—mostly centered around the date of September 1.

In my remarks I want especially to get at the question of a date for the festival.

September 1 is the first day of the liturgical year in the Orthodox church ("Indiction Day"). Over time it accrued association with the creation of the cosmos: not just the beginning of the year, but The Beginning of creation, sometimes including some touchingly earnest "calculations" that the world was in fact created on September 1st 5,509 BC.

That connection between the beginning of the liturgical year and the beginning of creation led to an invitation in 1989 from Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios "to the entire Christian world" to mark September 1st as a day of prayer for the creation: "thanksgiving for the gift of creation," and "petitions for its protection and salvation." In response to that invitation, a number of joint statements from world communions have been issued on September 1. The day has had little liturgical expression, being more of a call for individual prayer and environmental action. And then especially in 2024 there has been a greater interest in a liturgical expression, perhaps even an ecumenical liturgical festival.

This leaves us currently with a more-or-less unofficial 'season of creation' stretching from September 1 to October 4. (There are even two quite different approaches found at "season of creation dot COM," with the participation of a number of global church bodies and using the Revised Common Lectionary, or "season of creation dot ORG", coordinated largely by the Uniting Church in Australia, with some partners in the United States, and using an alternate lectionary focused on different ecological themes).

The wisdom of having a distinct "season of creation" does not yet have a fully developed consensus. (I think our two main festival cycles of Christmas and Easter are underappreciated as seasons of creation.) But I am glad there is some wider space on the calendar in which a focused creational emphasis might find liturgical expression.

In talking about where on the calendar we might locate that liturgical focus, I want to start by talking about the example of John the Baptist, or John the Forerunner. John is often portrayed as pointing to Christ. One of the oldest festivals on the Christian calendar is the nativity of John the Baptist on June 24. As the sun sets on John's June 24th nativity feast day, the final shadows at sunset on that day point across the landscape to a very specific place on the far horizon.

Those long shadows point to a very particular place, essentially unique to John's day: the place on the far horizon where the sun will rise on Christmas morning.

These days connect like a global liturgical Stonehenge, the shadow revealing the hidden place of Christmas sunrise. (This effect is true anyplace on earth where you can see the sun on these days.)

This is not an accident. Many people today notice that Christmas and solstice are neighbors, but it is not popularly known that when the feast of the incarnation emerged December 25th was in fact the calendrically established date of the solstice. Likewise, John the Forerunner's feast day originally marked in the northern hemisphere the longest day of the year, the other solstice, when—even bathed in maximum light—the church remembered, "John himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light," and the Forerunner's testimony that "He must increase, I must decrease."

Just as Christmas draws on the solstice, Easter incorporates springtime, equinox, and full Moon—and draws on agrarian seasonal patterns that undergird Passover.

In his thesis originally titled *The Cosmic Elements of Christian Passover,* Anscar Chupungco writes,

> for the ancient world nature was the locus of divine interventions and of human encounter with God. Nature and time were not only signs of God's dealings with people; they

> were symbols that embodied, manifested, and brought along … salvation. In short, they enjoyed a sacramental quality and played a sacramental role. This is the theology upon which the early church's understanding and celebration of Easter were firmly built.[1]

At first glance it appears—ironically!—that a September Feast of Creation would be less oriented by creation than Christmas and Easter. (Whatever charms it once held, the old tradition of calculating September 1 or any other fixed date as an annual "birthday of the cosmos" cannot bear the weight of science or theology anymore for most of us.) In comparing the feasts of Incarnation, Resurrection, and Creation, the lack of a cosmic orientation (like that enjoyed by Christmas and Easter) for a September 1 Feast of Creation immediately stands out.

However, September 1 appears to have an older connection with equinox. Alden Mosshammer has compiled evidence for a predecessor date for the beginning of the indictional year being September 23/24—their equinox.[2] (It was likely moved to September 1st in the fifth century to align with the empire's taxation schedule.) I think that what this current feast-proposal seeks to honor in the September 1 date is more fully—and originally—represented in the September equinox—which in a manner of speaking may be the "original" September 1.

The equinox is compelling for a few other reasons. It is the only time during the year when the earth's solar 'location' is essentially shared throughout the globe (northern and southern hemispheres alike). It is a moment of cosmic symmetry, a shared experience of God's glory in creation, and an image of the equity we seek in environmental justice.

With the March equinox already informing the feast of resurrection/new creation, there is compelling logic to a creation observance around the September equinox.

It is also interesting that the September equinox stands roughly midway between September 1 and October 4—nestled within weeks that some are already keeping as a season of creation.

One could imagine that at least some churches would keep something like a "day of prayer and action for the protection of the environment" on September 1, a Feast of Creation on the equinox or the Sunday after equinox, and St. Francis' Day on October 4, to constitute a strong season of creation.

Trying to schedule a date on the calendar to celebrate the goodness of creation can feel slightly silly—like trying to shoehorn the mystery of the cosmos onto

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1. Anscar J. Chupungco, *Shaping the Easter Feast* (Washington, DC:Pastoral Press, 1992), 17.
2. Alden Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20-24

Sched.com or iCal. But the question of imbuing our calendars with meaning is a liturgical vocation.

However, I can hear Ron Grimes encouraging us—especially in this crucial moment—not to cede our calendars to the imperial tax calendar:

> The view that ritual is merely optional or only decorative is anomalous in human religious and cultural history. It is an attitude mostly recent and largely Western. The questions: Who is truly human? and What is truly natural? have often been answered: the truly human people are those most truly in tune with nature, and those most truly in tune with nature are those who dance this particular rhythm in this particular ritual dance. So the natural, the human, and the ritualistic are, in the final analysis, one.[3]

I think the question of a *date* for any festival of creation isn't "merely optional or only decorative" but is a key part of a way that we dance with the cosmos in this critical moment.

In establishing a creation observance related to a date significant to every place on earth—the September equinox—the church would practice the dance that joins the heavens and the earth. The date is available for us, already within the season of creation.

But, before a final affirmative word, a final caveat from a cartoon from *The New Yorker*. The earth, looking deeply, is answering the moon's concerned inquiry about "what happened." The earth answers, "What 'happened' was only having Earth Day once a year."

It is a good reminder that the original feast of creation in Christianity is weekly, on Sunday. Justin Martyr writes in his apology, describing the logic of scheduling the weekly feast, first and most expansively of the logic of the creation: "We hold this meeting together on the day of the sun since it is the first day, on which day God, having transformed darkness and matter, made the world. On the same day Jesus Christ our savior rose from the dead."[4]

The urgency of establishing the date of any season or feast of creation is perhaps less pressing than a weekly day on which Christians might say, like Justin, even before naming resurrection, that we gather for a feast of creation.

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3. Ronald Grimes, "Ritual" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature,* ed. Bron Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2006).
4. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67.