

Gloria Shaab

“Dwelling in the Word: Divine Revelation in the Cosmos”

Episode 20 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

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Gloria Schaab is an assistant professor of systematic theology at Barry University in Florida. She is also a Sister of St. Joseph in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Scholarly interests in the mystery of God and suffering led her into the study of evolutionary theology and especially the work of the late Arthur Peacocke. Her 2007 monograph is titled, *The Creative Suffering of the Triune God: An Evolutionary Theology*.

HIGHLIGHTS

Gloria Schaab presents a system of theology that **maintains the Catholic doctrinal distinction between God and God’s Creation**, while suggesting that the presence of the Divine can indeed be experienced as ***dwelling within the natural world***. Hers is thus a theology that promotes **intimacy with and understanding of the Creator via enhanced intimacy with and study of the Creation**. Particular topics dealt with in depth include concepts of **God**, concepts of **Jesus**, the **Trinity**, **ecological values** and **Earth jurisprudence**, the **role of a systematic theologian**, and the importance of **recognizing one’s interpretive lenses**.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Highly recommended for theologians and students of theology, especially those within the tradition of Roman Catholicism. It is also well recommended for any Christian group eager to discuss ways to foster ecological values by recognizing God’s presence *in* the Creation — but without identifying God as Creation (e.g., the Oxford University Press description of Schaab’s 2007 book characterizes her perspective as, “grounded within a panentheistic paradigm of the God–world relationship”). Because Gloria Schaab is both a systematic theologian and a scholar, some of the concepts and language may be somewhat technical for lay or secular discussion groups. Nonetheless, the Study Guide questions for this episode focus on the most widely relevant concepts. As well, questions are tailored to encourage discussion of ideas in quoted extracts from a stance of personal life experience and emotional depth, while practicing the skill of perceiving a concept through “interpretive lenses” other than one’s own.

BLOG COMMENTS

Sheila Conner says:

Oh my gosh, these have been the most incredible conversations! I so love the science talk, but what I love about it most is that it moves me into a deeper contemplation of the Holy. And thank you, Gloria. I do think it's time for the contemplative to ponder what God is saying through the Cosmos—what is the Divine's fresh word for today.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Roman Catholicism, Sisters of St. Joseph, evolutionary theology, systematic theology, Arthur Peacocke, revelation (as ongoing), scriptures, Book of Genesis, John's prologue, God's Word, Karl Rahner, Jesus Christ (as the Word become flesh), the Creation, the Trinity, cosmos (as Word become matter), the Incarnation, the Triune God, suffering, grace (evolutionary view of), Thomas Aquinas, God as Creator, God's Self-revelation, Council of Chalcedon, interpretive lenses, hermeneutics, feminist insight, God as incomprehensible mystery, Augustine, Christopher Fry (poetry of), "creative suffering of God", Miriam MacGillis, contemplative questions, prayer, T.S. Elliot, Thomas Berry, "Earth jurisprudence", Pat Siemen, intrinsic value, species extinction, Rowan Williams, Benedictines, psalter, Psalms, emergence (as process of evolution), science (value of for religion)

BIOGRAPHY

Gloria L. Schaab is a Catholic evolutionary theologian and assistant professor of systematic theology at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate students in theology. She earned a Ph.D. in systematic theology at Fordham University, NY in 2005. Her scholarly work focuses on God as Trinity, evolutionary theology, and feminist theology.

Schaab's monograph *The Creative Suffering of the Triune God: An Evolutionary Theology*, published in 2007 by Oxford University Press, is the only book-length treatment of the theology of the late theologian-biochemist Arthur R. Peacocke. Using Peacocke's evolutionary insights, Schaab presents a triune God who suffers in, with, and under the suffering of the cosmos through a panentheistic God-world relationship. She developed the image of "Midwifery as a Model for Ecological Ethics: Expanding Arthur Peacocke's Models of Man-in-Creation," published in *Zygon* in 2007. Because of such works, Schaab was accorded the honor of presenting the keynote "Evolutionary Theory and Theology: A Mutually Illuminative Dialogue" at the *Zygon* Symposium honoring Arthur R. Peacocke in 2008.

Schaab has also engaged the evolutionary insights of Teilhard de Chardin, focusing on his evolutionary cosmology, as well as on the convergence of Teilhard's Christocentric worldview with Trinitarian theology. Her work, "The Divine Welling Up and Showing Through: Teilhard's Evolutionary Theology in a Trinitarian Panentheistic-Procreative Paradigm" appeared in the series *Teilhard Studies*. Her forthcoming book on evolutionary theology, entitled *Intimate Relations: Creation, Incarnation, and Grace in an Evolving Cosmos*, is scheduled for publication in 2013 by Anselm Academic Press. Schaab is a member of the religious congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Philadelphia.

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones posted, at the following url:
<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/gloria-schaab-a-theology-of-intimacy/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Starting from religion, or starting from science.** At the beginning of this interview, Gloria Schaab and host Michael Dowd exchange the fact that **both began their exploration of how the evolutionary sciences can enrich Christianity while firmly planted within religious institutions.** Gloria's path began as a Roman Catholic nun who entered a doctoral program in systematic theology when she was in her 40s. Michael Dowd entered this area of inquiry while he was preparing to become a Protestant minister.

Question 1: What path brought you to your interest in exploring the topic of science-and-religion? Or, if that is not yet a particular passion of yours, what led you to engage in this "Evolutionary Christianity" series?

2. **Historical contexts for theology and "interpretive lenses."** Gloria Schaab explains the importance of historical context and interpretive lenses in her vocation as a systematic theologian. She says,

The professional role of a **systematic theologian** is to take the **eternal truths** that were revealed in unique ways at particular times through our history and look at them through a hermeneutical lens, **an interpretive lens**, that understands that **no theologian does theology in an ahistorical vacuum.** The authors of scripture, inspired as it was, were inspired within a particular faith tradition, **historical context, gender, life experience, cultural influence, language,** etc.

Gloria Schaab then lists the three "interpretive lenses" that she herself uses when engaged in her work as a systematic theologian. **The three lenses are: Catholic Christianity, evolutionary theory, and feminist insight.** She then summarizes her stance: "What I try to do is to **rearticulate the deep truths of God's Self-revelation and ongoing Revelation for the age which God has made me responsible for as a theologian.**"

Question 2A: *Thus far in this series, do you think you have been weighing the opinions and perspectives expressed by the various speakers on a stand-alone basis? Or have you been **affected in your listening of them** by the portion of each interview that delves into each speaker's background, religious affiliation, and faith journey? Please reflect and then elaborate.*

Question 2B: *How important is it to you to learn something about the background and faith stance of a speaker or an author or a member of the clergy **when you are assessing the value of what they have to say**?*

Question 2C: *Knowing that Gloria Schaab interprets Christian doctrines through the lenses of Roman Catholicism, evolutionary theory, and feminist insight: **Does this affect your listening of what she has to say**, and in what ways?*

Question 2D: *How would you **briefly describe the lenses that you use** in perceiving and assessing the world?*

Editor's note: Another speaker in this series, Denis Lamoureux, who teaches science-and-religion at a university in Canada, said this:

Because I have the freedom and liberty, even in the first class I take out the Apostles' Creed. I read it, I explain it, I sign it, and I date it. And I say to my students, "You don't have to believe this, but beware of Denny's baggage. Okay? **Every professor has baggage. Don't think because I'm standing here that I have absolute truth and I'm absolutely right.**"

3. What does a 'systematic theologian' do? There are quite a few professional theologians in this interview series, but only Gloria Schaab and John Haught describe their specialty as 'systematic theology.' So what is systematic theology? Here are some definitions:

MerriamWebster.com: Systematic theology is a branch of theology concerned with summarizing the doctrinal traditions of a religion (as Christianity) especially with a view to relating the traditions convincingly to the religion's present-day setting.

The Free Dictionary (online): Systematic theology is that branch of theology of which the aim is to reduce all revealed truth to a series of statements that together shall constitute an organized whole.

Wikipedia: Systematic theology is a discipline of Christian theology that attempts to formulate an orderly, rational, and coherent account of the Christian faith and beliefs.

Question 3: *Systematic theologians, therefore, build systems of thought and interpretation that incorporate and make sense of a lot more than simply Christian scripture — but also traditional interpretations of the faith and present-day science and values. As Wikipedia says, it requires interpretations to be "**orderly, rational, and coherent.**" So the question is: **To what extent is the precision work of theologians important to you** in your own faith journey or in helping you assess the relevance for today of long-standing Christian doctrines?*

4. God as "incomprehensible mystery." A major focus of this conversation is various

concepts of God. Gloria Schaab says,

One of the core concepts of Christian theology from time immemorial is the notion that **God is incomprehensible mystery**. Augustine had that wonderful saying: “If you think you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.” If what we have done is to limit, to box in, to say that somehow this is the last word, the last Revelation of God, then Augustine would say that what we think we understand is not God, because by nature God is a wholly incomprehensible mystery.

I am a teacher. I am a teacher of undergraduates and graduate students. I often say to my students that **if we take the idea of mystery as that which is totally unknowable and totally unfathomable, then we theologians are out of a job**. We have nothing more to say. But Karl Rahner had a wonderful definition of mystery. What he says is that **“mystery is not the unknowable, but the infinitely knowable.”**

Question 4A: *What is your response to Gloria Schaab’s way of bridging “incomprehensible mystery” with “infinitely knowable”? And is hers an approach that engages your own rational judgment, or do you find yourself treating it more like **a paradox, or a Zen koan** — that is, using aspects of your mind deeper than the rational?*

Question 4B: *What is your own understanding and experience of “God” ?*

5. **Clearly distinguishing God and God’s Creation.** In Christianity in general, and in Roman Catholic theology in particular, **official doctrine is that there is a distinct separation between God and the Cosmos**. The two cannot be collapsed—otherwise, the result may be “pantheism,” including the “paganism” of the Roman Empire, from which early Christians distinguished themselves. Not surprisingly, **all the Catholic theologians in this series are very precise in their choice of language** in speaking about the relationship between God and Cosmos, between God and God’s Creation. Here is how Gloria Schaab makes that distinction at the very beginning of the interview. She says,

The world in which we live is a Self-expression of God. The way in which God has revealed God’s Self from the beginning is through the cosmos, through human experiences, preeminently in Jesus Christ, and through the continuing evolving Creation of the cosmos that happens through the evolutionary processes. We continue to dwell in that which finds life through God’s Self-communication, through God’s Self-revelation, which we call “The Word.”

At the end of the interview, she speaks further on this notion of “Dwelling in the Word,” which is the title she recommended for her episode in this series. She says,

An evolutionary perspective has as an essential component of its processes the notion of **emergence**, the notion of movement, the notion in many ways of *future*. This, born of the reality that we are surrounded by, immersed in, in touch with God everywhere we turn. **Every creature, every event is a means by which God is present to us and is communicating with us.** Believing is seeing. It is not the other way around. Believing that God is actually present within every creature and every event, and is trying to communicate with us through every creature and every event, attunes us to that presence of God. So if we really believe that **God is immersed in this**

evolutionary universe, then we are more able to see it. And if we are more able to see it, then in fact we really are **dwelling within the Word, and dwelling within the ongoing Revelation of the Divine**.

Question 5A: *Gloria Schaab's way of **maintaining a distinction between God and God's Creation** is framed in a way that enables one to perceive a profound **intimacy between God and Creation**—and hence in one's ability to experience God via the natural world. Setting aside, for the moment, your own beliefs on this topic, do you feel that this interview presents her system of theology clearly enough for you **to step into her shoes and see through her eyes**? That is, do you understand why Schaab's way of framing the relationship between God and God's Creation may be welcomed by those, especially within Catholicism, who love experiencing and contemplating nature? Please elaborate.*

Question 5B: *To what extent is a clear distinction between God and God's Creation (which Gloria Schaab refers to as "a Self-expression of God") **an important matter for you**?*

Question 5C: *Two of the guest speakers in this "Evolutionary Christianity" series are former Roman Catholic priests who were **silenced and then expelled from the priesthood for ideas** that were deemed by the Catholic hierarchy to depart too greatly from accepted Church doctrine. The two are Matthew Fox and Michael Morwood—both of whom now attract considerable audiences that are quite ecumenical—within and beyond Christianity. **Is the very real possibility of silencing, book banning, and even expulsion by Church authorities something you keep in mind when you are trying to understand and evaluate the theological statements made by speakers in this series?***

Editor's Note: In March 2011 (just three months after the Evolutionary Christianity conversations were recorded), *The New York Times* reported, ["Bishops Urge Catholic Schools to Ban a Nun's Book"](#). The book in question was *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. The author is a noted theologian at Fordham University: Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson. The bishops' committee on doctrine said in a statement: "The book does not take the faith of the Church as its starting point. Instead, the author employs standards from outside the faith to criticize and to revise in a radical fashion the conception of God revealed in Scripture and taught by the Magisterium," (which is the church's teaching authority according to the popes and bishops). The article reports that "Sister Johnson is a prominent feminist theologian and a former president of both the Catholic Theological Society of America and the American Theological Society. She belongs to a religious order in New York, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood." Note: Host Michael Dowd had invited Elizabeth Johnson to be interviewed in this series in December 2010, but she declined.

Question 5D: *This question is aimed at those who faith tradition is Roman Catholic, as well as those who regard themselves as former Catholics or lapsed Catholics: To what extent was the practice of **clergy silencing and book banning** of concern to you prior to your encounter with this series? And to what extent does it affect your views and feelings now?*

6. **The role of contemplation and prayer within a ‘systematic theology’ framework.** Gloria Schaab moves **beyond the rational and pattern-seeking core** of her profession as a systematic theologian and talks about where other facets of the human mind come into play. She says,

What I know that I am called to do as an **evolutionary systematic theologian** is, if I truly believe that God is revealing God’s Self through the cosmos, then what I need to do is to look at the cosmos and say, What is God revealing God’s Self to be? How is God revealing God’s Self to act within the situation? **Those are not just theological questions or scientific questions. Miriam Therese MacGillis used to say that these are contemplative questions. We need to look at the cosmos and bring it to prayer, and bring it to contemplation,** and bring it to study and ask, What is this Word of God saying to us at this time in history about who God is and how God relates to the world?

Question 6A: *What, if anything, does Gloria Schaab’s statement call up for you?*

Question 6B: *For all the ongoing things you learn about the Universe and our planet, about history, and about the human condition, how do you **assimilate those new learnings and integrate them with your core values and beliefs,** with rational analysis, and with your emotional depth? (For example, Gloria Schaab mentions that **prayer and contemplation** are important to her for working toward integration.)*

7. **Who is Jesus?** Within the system of theology that Gloria Schaab has built for making sense of and expressing long-held Roman Catholic doctrines of faith, she, of course, turns her interpretive energies to the matter of **Jesus and his significance**. She says,

Aside from the whole miracle of the Incarnation, what is so miraculous is that it isn’t simply a demonstration of God’s love for us that God becomes present in our history. Rather, God becomes present in our history within the very materiality, the very stuff of the cosmos, the very stuff of Creation. **So the Creation isn’t simply the stage** on which at some point the Word becomes flesh. In an evolutionary context, the Word of God spoken at Creation, metaphorically and analogically, that brings Creation into being—that Word of God comes to a fuller, more vibrant, and (as Christians would suggest) a preeminent expression in **Jesus Christ, who is part of the very matter of the universe.** . . .

Jesus Christ was **truly human**, in addition to being **truly divine**. And to be truly human means to possess an enduring relationship, just like the rest of us, with the cosmos of which we are a part, and from which the very molecules and stuff of our body, our humanity, and our personhood emerged. So **Jesus is part of that holy emergence of the human person.**

Question 7: *What comes up for you when you listen or read and then try to take in what Gloria Schaab is saying about Jesus? How do you, yourself, interpret both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith? Are they the same for you or do you make a distinction between them?*

8. **Celebrating the Trinity within a mainstream understanding of cosmic history.** The Trinity is a **central doctrine of Roman Catholic faith**. In 2007 Oxford University Press

published a book that Gloria Schaab wrote, titled, *The Creative Suffering of the Triune God: An Evolutionary Theology*. In this interview, Schaab speaks of the Trinity in this way,

I think as Christians, we probably don't delve deeply enough into the notion of Trinity. But it is so consistent and **so compatible ... with an evolutionary worldview**. . . .

Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, became flesh, but within the structures and entities and processes and matter that characterizes the rest of Creation, the rest of the cosmos. And by doing so, He entered into, again, an enduring relationship with all matter.

Question 8A: *Is the Trinity an important belief or concept for you? How so or why not?*

Question 8B: *In thinking about the Trinity, are your views affected by any **non-trinitarians** you may know and respect—for example, **Unitarians**? If so, please elaborate.*

Question 8C: *Have you **integrated an understanding of history** into your reflections on the Trinity? For example, **in 1553 Michael Servetus** was burned at the stake in Geneva—not at the behest of Roman Catholic authorities but because of statements made against him by the Protestant **John Calvin**. Wikipedia reports: “At his trial, **Servetus was condemned on two counts, for spreading and preaching Nontrinitarianism and anti-infant baptism**. Historians record his last words as: “Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me.” Overall, does the history within Christendom of persecution for **heresy** make any difference in your response to deeply rooted religious doctrines today? Alternatively, perhaps, do the huge distinctions in **cultural contexts over the course of centuries** keep this ancient doctrine fresh in your mind—and thus untarnished by how it was used previously to justify persecution?*

9. **Lifting up the sciences and enriching Christian faith.** Recall that Gloria Schaab told us that she used three “lenses” for her interpretive work as a systematic theologian. The three lenses are **Catholic Christianity, evolutionary theory, and feminist insight**. Given that this interview was conducted as part of the “Evolutionary Christianity” series, Gloria and host Michael Dowd probe deeply into **the integration of science and faith**. Here are two extracts from the dialogue that reveal **Gloria’s enthusiasm for science**—and evolutionary science in particular.

We have to do the hard work, I think, the really hard work of reading and interpreting the Word of God—not only the Word made scripture, not only the Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ, but also primordially the Word of God made cosmos, **the Word of God made matter**. And **the only way to do that in this contemporary age is to do it in dialogue with evolutionary science**. If we do not allow that to happen, if we won't put those lenses on, then we are never going to be able to, in some sense I believe, share the vision of God. . . .

The more fully we enter into what science, what evolutionary science, what quantum physics, what all of the sciences are telling us about this marvelous world, this marvelous cosmos in which we live, **how can it not redound to the glory of God?** That is what the Psalms have told us for ages. Look at Creation. It redounds to the glory of God. Now we can say, **look at evolutionary theory, look at scientific revelation, scientific understandings of this universe,**

and let it redound to both the glory of God and to a deeper, fuller knowledge of God—more so than we can ask or imagine.

Question 9: *Gloria Schaab is a devout Catholic nun and scholar who feels called to integrate and elevate modern scientific understandings with ancient Christian doctrines. Stepping into Gloria's shoes for a moment, **can you feel her excitement?** Can you sense the pride that her religious sisters in the Catholic order of St. Joseph must feel in Gloria's having begun her scholarly studies later in life and then having persevered to the point where she is now teaching and writing in systematic theology? Please elaborate.*

10. **“Don't make God small.”** Gloria Schaab speaks of how an integration of science with religion enlarges her sense of the divine. She says,

To somehow suggest that God's Revelation of God's Self cannot be ongoing through **Creation as it continues to evolve**, to me, is to box God in. It is to limit God. I mean, part of the passion of my life is to suggest that God is way bigger, and way more majestic, and way more expansive than any of us can conceive. **Most of the time I am saying to myself, “Your image of God is too small.** It is too small. Allow God to reveal God's Self as God desires to. And don't box God in. Don't make God small.”

Question 10: *Have you experienced (either in yourself or in someone you know) that **a devout person can integrate science with faith in a way that actually enlarges and enlivens their sense of God?** If so, how did you gain that sense of possibility? If not, can you step into Gloria's shoes and sense the importance for her of doing so? Please elaborate.*

11. **An evolutionary view of “grace.”** Gloria Schaab brings science to bear in her interpretation of “grace.” She says,

In terms of **an evolutionary view of grace**, the issue here is that grace is not simply a thing that somehow intermittently or episodically God decides to distribute to certain persons. I have this vision of grace, and it would be similar to what we would consider God the Holy Spirit. It is an **image of grace that pervades, is immanent within the creative processes of the cosmos.** Taking the evolutionary perspective of whole-part interaction, or top-down causation, in some sense **grace is almost like an energy that continues to bombard the universe with life, with energy, with love, with possibility.**

So again, grace in an evolutionary perspective isn't something that simply happens once in a while. As Catholic theology says, “The giver is the gift.” Grace as a gift of God is actually the gift of God's very life in and through the processes of the cosmos. It is available to people as gift, available to the cosmos as gift, and promoting the ongoing creativity of the cosmos itself.

Question 11: ***What is your own sense** — secular or religious, whichever you prefer — of the notion of “grace.” And does Gloria's interpretation of grace within an evolutionary context resonate with you? (Whether your answer is yes or no, please elaborate.)*

12. **Fostering care for the Earth—theologically.** Gloria Schaab brings systematic theology to

bear in supporting the importance of care for Earth. She says,

Beneath the legal arguments for Earth jurisprudence is a very theological concept: that **all Creation has intrinsic value because it is the Self-revelation of God**. As **Tom Berry** would say, every time we cause the extinction of a species or we cause the death of part of God's Creation, what we are actually doing is **reducing the Revelation of God**. What we are actually doing is suppressing a way in which God desired to reveal God's Self, which we squander because of not realizing the intrinsic value of everything in Creation, simply as the Creation of a good God who looked at all things and said, "This is good. This is good. This is very good."

So any time our actions cause the **destruction or devastation** of a part of the cosmos or of a part of the Earth, in a sense what we are doing is literally silencing God in some way, literally truncating God's Self-revelation.

Question 12A: *In what contexts do you think Gloria Schaab's way of fostering care for the Earth and Earth's creatures would have the most impact? And are these sorts of **theological arguments** helpful in encouraging your own stance on matters of ecological concern? Please elaborate.*

Question 12B: *Is there an aspect of **your regard for a healthy Earth**, care for biodiversity, and other ecological concerns that you can point to as, in some sense, having been **fostered through your faith or philosophical perspective**? Or are your ecological values mostly a product of what you have learned in secular contexts about ecology and your **personal experience** of the natural world?*

13. **POEM: Christopher Fry, "A Sleep of Prisoners."** During the interview, Gloria Schaab **recites the closing lines of a poem** written in 1951 by the British playwright Christopher Fry. What prompts her to do this is her own comments about the importance of this time in history: She prefaces her recitation this way:

What a more critical time in history could we have? It is a time of **ecological devastation**. It is a time of global violence and global oppression that is literally unmatched at any other time in history.

Here is the poem by Christopher Fry. It is titled,

A SLEEP OF PRISONERS

Dark and cold we may be, but this
Is no winter now. The frozen misery
Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,

Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul we ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God.
Where are you making for? It takes
So many thousand years to wake,
But will you wake for pity's sake!

Question 13: *What is your response to this poem? What, if any, poetry have you found particularly inspiring, and why?*

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