

Ilia Delio

“The Emergent Christ and Evolutionary Catholicism”

Episode 23 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Ilia Delio is one of the premier Catholic theologians bringing a scientific, evolutionary understanding fully into her interpretation of Christian doctrines (notably, God, the Christ, salvation, and care for Creation). A Franciscan sister with a doctorate in historical theology, she is a fellow at the Science and Religion program at Georgetown University. Her books include *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*.

HIGHLIGHTS

Even though Ilia Delio is a theologian and academic, in this dialogue she focuses on the **personal and practical meaning of Christian theological doctrines translated anew through a cosmic and evolutionary lens**. Topics covered in depth include the experience of **prayer** and entirely new ways to conceive of the **Christ**, the **cross**, and **salvation** that transcend the constraints of literalism while bypassing liberal ways of modernizing doctrines that reduce their power and appeal.

This is also a superb episode for generating discussion on **new religious metaphors for God**; for probing **whether our concept of ‘faith’ withers when it is equated with ‘belief’ rather than ‘trust’**; for considering whether **spirituality is less about otherworldly concerns and more about fostering ‘right relationships’ in *this* world**. Because different ways of knowing (**intuitive and rational**) are points of discussion in the dialogue, this episode affords an excellent opportunity for participants to assess and perhaps improve how those sometimes-conflicting modes play out in society and in their lives. Because the role of **technology** in human evolution is a central concern for Ilia Delio, this episode is a superb platform for encouraging participants to reflect on and share their own experiences (for good or ill) with **Internet modes of communicating and relating**.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This episode is highly recommended for all audiences who are eager (or at least curious) to explore cosmic and evolutionary understandings of core doctrines of Christian faith and practice. Clergy, seminarians, and students of religion will surely discover new ideas and

interpretations worth reflecting on. Protestants as well as Catholics will find the topics pertinent to their concerns. Lay people will be pleased to discover that concepts are explained in ways that are both accessible and applicable to how we interpret and live our lives.

BLOG COMMENTS

Timothy says:

Wow!!! Sr. Delio is amazing. The best balance of the scientific knowledge and well grounded Christian spirituality I've heard yet. She had all kinds of bells ringing in my soul, like a hot pinball flying through the Cosmos. Encore!

Brian says:

You're right about the rich content. I'll certainly need to listen to this many times. Fascinated by the clear logic laced with wisdom ("knowledge deepened by love" I think was the definition). It is so refreshing to hear Christians talking like this. I'd begun to think I shouldn't label myself a Christian because I'm so far gone as far as my evangelical background is concerned. Now I'm not so sure.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Franciscan religious order, neurophysiological research, grace moments, Thomas Merton, Catholic religious life (awakening to), **incarnation, Christ-centered faith, Carmelite monastic life, God's presence** (in individual lives), **"greenhouse for God", nature** (connecting with), **obedience** (in religious life), **prayer** (importance of), **theology** (similarities to science), **religion-and-science** (as discussed within research science), **mechanistic universe** (v. God infused), **science as awe producing, self-organization** (within nature), **autopoiesis, Elisabet Sahtouris, human experience** (universality of), **God is love, Brian Swimme, gravity** (similarity to love), **allurement** (within Cosmos), **Augustine, love** (as "the gravity of the soul"), **cooperation** (expansion of through time), **God as "primordial relationality", emergent evolution, Teilhard de Chardin, trajectory of evolution, the cross** (as metaphor for evolution), **unity** (drive for and against), **epic of evolution, Thomas Berry, human intimacy with cosmos, rationality in science, brain** (ways of thinking shaped by patterning of experience), **science and prayer** (as contrasting), **prayer** (bodily experience of), **Kierkegaard, experience of God, surrender, theology as faith endeavor, bridging science and faith, wisdom** (as reason plus faith), **Carl Sagan, universe as "beingness of God", pantheism, Sallie McFague, universe as "body of God", core metaphor for God, faith of a child** (as direct experience v. interpretation), **faith as trust** (not belief), **mind/body split, Cartesian dualism, Enlightenment, Scholasticism** (critique of), **experiential faith** (loss of), **science v**

spirituality, religious trust (as surrender), **knowledge v. information, information-based education** (critique of), **environmental crisis** (careerist education as contributing to), **ecological footprint, spirituality as “right relationship with reality”**, **Internet** (good and bad effects on relationality), **transhumanism** (role of technology in), **Joel de Rosnay, Kevin Kelly, technology** (role of), **monasteries** (as loci for technology development in Middle Ages), **Second Coming of Christ** (history of expectation), **Alan Turing, computers** (history of), **pragmatism, Ray Kurzweil, death** (natural importance of), **Facebook, human evolution** (future of), **Jesus** (an evolutionary understanding of for religion), **Duns Scotus, the Christ** (as the reason that a loving God created the universe), **word of God, love** (as incarnated throughout all space and time), **the Resurrection** (as exemplifying new creation), **baptism** (meaning of), **salvation** (this-world meaning of)

BIOGRAPHY

Ilia Delio is a Senior Fellow at Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University, where she concentrates in the area of Science and Religion. She is currently involved in research projects on transhumanism, technology and evolution, and ecology and education. She is also exploring the theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. She is the recipient of a Templeton course award in Science and Religion, which she received in 2000.

Prior to her appointment at Woodstock, she was Professor and Chair of Spirituality Studies at Washington Theological Union, where she taught in the areas of general spirituality, Franciscan theology, and science and religion. She holds a doctorate in pharmacology from New Jersey Medical School / Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and a doctorate in historical theology from Fordham University.

Delio, a Franciscan sister, is the author of 11 books including, *The Humility of God; Christ in Evolution; Ten Evenings with God;* and *Care for Creation*, which won two Catholic Press Book Awards in 2009. Her 2011 book, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*, was in-press at the time of this interview. The online short description of this book reveals the scope of her work: “Ilia Delio makes fascinating sense of the universe, beginning with the story of cosmic evolution, coursing through the meaning of God in evolution and the emergence of Christ, and concluding with new ways of seeing Christ in all things. As Teilhard de Chardin did in *The Divine Milieu*, Ilia Delio reveals the sacrament of God at work in the world.”

Note: A widely cited reflection of Catholic women religious by Ilia Delia, “Confessions of a Modern Nun,” is available online:

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11905

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEOS

“Jesuits and the Sciences: Black Holes and Teilhard de Chardin” (with Ilia Delio; 8 mins)

<http://vimeo.com/30077267>

“Science and Religion with Sr. Ilia Delio, OSF” [transhumanism] (5 mins)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dS5iKogAjo>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and new ones added) at:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/ilia-delio-the-emergent-christ-evolutionary-catholicism/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Journey from research scientist to contemplative nun to theologian and teacher.** As with all episodes in this series, host Michael Dowd asks his guest to summarize her faith journey. We learn that Ilia Delio received her first PhD in pharmacology and that she briefly conducted research in neurophysiology before feeling called to contemplative life as a Carmelite nun. Transferring to the Franciscan order, she then studied for her doctorate in historical theology, which is now her career. The author of 11 books in theology, including topics in science-and-religion, Ilia Delio is one of several guests in this series who has advanced training and experience in both science and religion.

Question 1A: *What **most struck you** (or surprised or moved you) in Ilia Delio’s telling of her personal faith journey and shifting career?*

Question 1B: *Ilia Delio mentions, but only briefly, a major awakening, a **grace moment** in her life. She recalls:*

I always had an attraction to religious life, but really it was an experience in the lab—I was in spinal cord research and, as a neurophysiologist, a lot of my time was sitting very quietly in a laboratory with a lot of instrumentation. One day, I was recording neuronal firing and there was something about the event that **just ripped me in its awesomeness**. For the first time I was amazed by the fact that I was recording a single motor neuron—a living one. There was something about that moment that was grace-filled. Shortly, around that time, I had come across the works of Thomas Merton. I knew nothing about Merton, nothing about contemplative life. But it was my own exploration into the spinal cord and the brain and reading Merton at the same time, believe it or not, that **awakened within me a strong desire to be God-centered**. I had this idea: I wanted to be like Merton, to leave everything, to go to the desert and to live totally for Christ. There was something about his leaving the world and going to the Trappist monastery that spoke to me as well.

*So the question is this: If you were asked to point to just **one thing you learned about science**, or one experience you had in nature, that **most profoundly touched your heart** and changed your perspective, what might it be?*

Question 1C: *Awakening experiences are sometimes very **difficult to put into words** and to make sense to a listener or reader. To what extent have you had difficulty in using words to convey an important experience?*

2. **God is love; gravity is allurement.** One of the **recurrent themes** voiced by the guests in this series is the sense that God is love, or that **love is a divine and pervasive presence in the cosmos**. In the preceding episodes, these guests also offered this view: Bruce Sanguin, Denis Lamoureux, Ross Hostetter, John Cobb, Jim Burklo, John Spong, John Haught, and Mary Southard. In this interview Ilia Delio very much agrees with that position. She says,

When we say that God is love, I really think that love is the heart and the glue that binds this whole Earth together. Every single person has the desire to love and to be loved. The beauty is that this **love is the God who emerges from within**. That love is then expressed in a variety of languages in a plurality of ways, and in a many different cultures.

Then Delio and Dowd discuss **Brian Swimme's notion of allurement as a divine power**. In the cosmos the power of allurement is expressed primarily as **gravity**; in the human realm, as **love**. Dowd recalls, "I remember the first time I entertained that idea: I thought it was a little bit weird, but there was something that really struck me. I was touched, I was inspired by that way of thinking. And playing with that mindset was really useful." Then Ilia Delio says,

It's interesting that **Augustine spoke of love as the weight of the soul**. And you can speak of love as the gravity of the soul. As physical gravity bends the space-time fabric of the Earth, intense love bends the soul and opens it up to more love or to more relationship.

Question 2: *To what extent is the notion "**God is love**," or "Love is a divine power of the universe" an aspect of your viewpoint or faith? What about Brian Swimme's suggestion that '**allurement**' is expressed physically as gravity and humanly as love? Or Ilia Delio's that just "as physical gravity bends the space-time fabric of the Earth, intense love bends the soul"?*

3. **Intimacy with the universe.** The host, Michael Dowd, participates extensively in this dialogue. At one point he speaks of a gift he received from this evolutionary perspective. He explains,

For me, this epic of evolution I first learned through **Thomas Berry** and **Brian Swimme**. What it did for me was ground this metaphysical or spiritual concept of oneness in physical reality. It wasn't only a metaphysical concept; it was a physical reality that **we are in fact the universe, after some 13.7 billion years of unbroken evolution, now becoming conscious of itself**. We really are nature uncovering its own nature. You can't *be* alienated. You can *feel* alienated when you're out of integrity or when you're pursuing your own self-interest at the expense of your community or the larger communities that you're a part of. You can certainly *feel* alienated. But it's impossible to ontologically *be* alienated in this universe, because you're always a part of this larger body of life.

Question 3: This notion of human intimacy—indeed, identity—with the cosmos is a recurrent theme in this series. Overall, it is a rather popular path of awakening to, and receiving gifts from, this evolutionary point of view. *To what extent have you contemplated this sense of expanded identity with the cosmos? How does it make you feel?*

4. **Experiencing God through prayer.** Ilia Delio tells her story of entering a convent as, in part, **the attraction of making prayer a fuller part of her life.** Later she gives us a sense of what, in particular, she gains from the practice of prayer. She explains,

In the scientific area, the body is not really part of the process—it may be—but we're less attentive to its part in the whole knowing process. The focus is usually on the cognitive or intellectual portion of knowing. **In the monastic way of prayer there's a much greater involvement of the whole person, of the whole body, and the whole spirit in the experience of God.** The knowing of God is a knowing process that goes on in prayer. It's a different knowing ... it's not rational per se.

She continues with a detailed description of what prayer means to her. She says,

God is more of an experience that one is grasped by than one grasps. We do not grasp God; it's God who grasps us, if we allow ourselves to be grasped. And that pulls us into **a different way of not knowing**, but our defenses are let down in that being grasped by God. It's almost that thing of surrender that we hear about and write about sometimes and talk about. **In the surrender, we're not in charge. We don't have our defenses up, and we don't have all our intellectual reasons all lined up.** The experience of God pulls us off our feet. But if we allow ourselves to be taken up by that God-experience, we're not in charge of the knowing process—**we almost become like children.** Everything becomes **more wondrous, more revelatory, more of a discovery.** The knowing process of the spiritual life is **a return to a more primitive level** of what Jesus says in the Gospel, "Unless you become like children, you cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven."

Question 4A: *To what extent does Ilia Delio's experience of God through prayer coincide with your own? **Is her experience something you admire—even long for? Or is it something you view skeptically** and that you are perhaps even wary of? Can you identify some root experience in your life that may have inclined you either toward or away from the effort and experience of prayer?*

Question 4B: *Ilia Delio uses the word "surrender" in her description of prayer that leads to an experience of God. To what extent is "surrender" an experience you deem valuable in your own spiritual life? If you have experience of or in a **12-step recovery process**, do you comprehend why "surrender" is a crucial part of it (Step 3)?*

5. **Cognitive knowing and intuitive knowing in faith development.** In her career trajectory and in what she says in this dialogue, Ilia Delio conveys that she deeply values both cognitive and intuitive ways of knowing. She says,

As a theologian, like a scientist, we're asked to think through questions of faith. But the difference between a theologian and a scientist is that a theologian is thinking through a question of faith in light of faith. There's something about that **bodily experience**, along with an **intuition** of knowing, along with a **cognitive** sense of knowing—all this to say is that the brain has the capacity to change—which means you never feel stuck saying, “I can never believe” or “I could never become a believer” or “I can never move from my opinion.” Yes you can! Everyone can change, and the brain has an immense capacity to rewire and to think in new ways, to discover and to experience the data of this life and the universe in new ways.

Question 5A: *In your own personal life and in the religious or philosophical perspective you espouse, how important (and in which contexts) are **cognitive ways of knowing**, as exemplified by mainstream, evidential, and testable science? Secondly, where in your life and worldview do you value **intuitive-experiential ways of knowing**?*

Question 5B: *How great is the divide between these two different ways of knowing? For example, if you wish to discuss a particular topic with a friend or in a group and you are looking for an exchange of ideas that is mostly **cognitive**, what happens when you hear a response that is drawn from the intuitive-experiential realm — and that you regard as dismissing or opposing what is already known through mainstream science? What about the reverse: What about when you wish to explore a theme via **an intuitive-experiential** path (for example, through the telling of personal stories) and you hear a response that comes from the objective, cognitive realm?*

Question 5c: *What is your experience of the distinctive ways of knowing in this group? Do cognitive/rational and intuitive/experiential approaches mostly interact in helpful or in problematic ways? If the latter, is there a solution you might suggest? If, on the other hand, you are happy with **how this group honors different ways of knowing**, might this experience offer tips for how you can enhance communications in other aspects of your life? Please elaborate.*

6. **What is wisdom?** Continuing on this theme of different ways of knowing, Ilia Delio talks about **how the two ways of knowing must come together**—and that the result is *wisdom*. She says,

I do think a lot of people get stuck either in the world of **rational thinking** from the scientific point of view or in **faith alone**, without any reasoning, in the world of religion. On either side there's a reluctance to allow **reasoning and faith to come together** and to allow the brain to be exercised or rewired to be more encompassing of both: of what we can know in the world by way of *experience* and what we can know in the world by way of *faith*.

They are not opposed. The only way they are opposed is if we make them opposed—if we throw up our defenses, with all sorts of rational reasons. But we know that knowledge itself is much deeper than reason alone. The deepest knowledge, and this goes to all religions since the ancient

traditions, is really wisdom. And **wisdom is knowledge deepened by love**. Wisdom is the bridge between the rational knower and the faith knower.

Question 6: *What, for you, is wisdom? And how do you recognize it in yourself and in others?*

7. **Celebrating God; celebrating ‘emergent evolution’**. Throughout this Evolutionary Christianity series, Dowd repeatedly invites his colleagues to join him in “**untrivializing God.**” In this interview with Ilia Delio, Dowd finds an enthusiastic colleague in that quest, which she has embarked upon independently, using her own terminology. Here is how the dialogue proceeds:

Ilia: The brain is most incredible—we couldn’t have created it even if we tried. To me, you’d have to say **only God could create something so incredibly complex**. What’s amazing is that the brain is so finely tuned, and you have multiple processors going on, and multiple circuits for the simplest thing, for example, moving your finger. It is unbelievably amazing how many processes are going on simultaneously in that one small movement. From the desire to move your finger, to the movement, to the muscle, to the neuron, to the experience of the movement itself: it’s incredible! That’s all I can say.

Host: What you just shared **sparked some ideas in me** that I don’t remember ever having before, and I want to throw them out and see if they float or what you think of them. And please feel free to be radically honest. When I think that the human brain is so incredible that it could only have been created by God—and I agree, except that (not *except*, because you may think this way too)—for me, **when I use the word God, I’m including the entire body of life**.

Ilia: Yes, I am too, actually.

Host: Carl Sagan begins his Cosmos series, “If you want to make an apple pie, you must first invent the universe.” And so it takes 13 billion years to create an apple pie!

Ilia: **I don’t distinguish between God and the universe—between God here *and* the world over there. For me, the whole being of world itself is the beingness of God.** Now I am not conflating those two things—it’s not a pantheistic thing. But when I talk about Creation and emergent evolution, what I’m saying is that there’s something that is the being of being itself and that pushes or impels being onward towards **greater unity and greater life**. And that is who God is for me.

Question 7A: *What is your overall response to this dialogue on God? To what extent do you agree or disagree with Dowd’s and Delio’s preferences for what each means when they use the term, God?*

Question 7B: *If you had an opportunity to step into this conversation exactly at the end of this excerpt, what would your next comment or question be?*

Question 7C: We seem to be living in a time in which, in all secular and religious circles except for the most theologically conservative, one almost has to define the word ‘God’ before using it. Otherwise, one may be misunderstood. So here is a question: **Have you ever**

become cautious about using the word God? What situations have you feeling the most out of sync — either in what you mean by ‘God’ or what others mean by ‘God’?

Question 7D: PANTHEISM: In this conversation series, three speakers who happily engage with Dowd in “untrivializing” what is meant by the term ‘God’ are quick to point out that what they are saying **is not pantheism**. All three are **Catholic theologians**: Ilia Delio, Gloria Schaab (study guide question 20.5), and Linda Gibler (study guide question 33.8). Do you think it is a coincidence that the speakers who expressly distance themselves from pantheism are Catholic theologians? Or is there an institutional or doctrinal distinction between Protestants and Catholics that may account for this? As well, how important is it to you personally to be regarded as someone for whom the label ‘pantheist’ may or may not apply?

8. **Core metaphors for ‘God’.** Dowd relates how important it was for him several decades ago to encounter a book by **Christian theologian Sallie McFague**, who wrote about the importance of “core metaphors” in religious terminology. McFague suggested, for example, that **‘kingdom of God’** had outlived its usefulness as a core metaphor—and that **‘the universe as God’s body’** was much more suitable for these times. Dowd explains why ‘the universe as God’s body’ was an important new image for him in his faith journey. He explains,

This metaphor is not to be taken literally. But to step inside and live within that metaphor is life-changing for many people. Suddenly you realize that **you cannot worship the Creator and then dis the Creation**. When we work for justice, when we work for peace, when we work for sustainability, and when we work for a healthy future, we are in the process of honoring the divine, of honoring God.

Question 8: To what extent **have you been exposed to new metaphors** for understanding religious concepts or doctrines? To what extent do you see your own faith tradition as lagging behind or moving too fast in shifting what is meant by traditional concepts and in substituting new images and meanings for the old?

Note: **Sallie McFague**, Professor Emerita of Vanderbilt University, declined Dowd’s invitation to speak in this series, as she was unavailable when the conversations were recorded in November 2010 through January 2011.

9. **Faith: trust or belief?** Dowd describes **a new insight** he came to during the course of this dialogue. He tells Ilia Delio that it happened ...

... when you quoted **Jesus** saying that, **unless we have the faith of a child, we won’t see or experience the kingdom of God**. What occurred to me at that moment is that children experience life in a fairly un-interpreted way. In other words, they experience life directly. Then, depending upon what culture they grow up in and what their family’s belief system is, they start gaining interpretations and stories of how to interpret that experience. But prior to that, it’s this unmediated “Wow!” — **the awe, the fascination, the joy, the excitement**. That’s one of the reasons why kids

are fascinated by animals and all kinds of things. That stance of what we call faith, from the perspective of children, is really more **trust**. It's this open-handed and open-hearted stance to a **reality that's full of expectancy and fascination**.

But then as we begin to take on the belief systems and the interpretive structures of our culture and our family and our religious tradition and whatever—which is all necessary and unavoidable—what happens is **we start becoming attached to particular ways of interpreting**. Then we close down to other metaphors or other interpretive schemes, and then **faith begins to shift from trust to beliefs**. And then, for many of us adults, when we think of faith we think of beliefs rather than trust.

Question 9: *Does Dowd's characterization of the usual faith developmental process from "trust" to "beliefs" ring true in your own experience? How or how not?*

10. **Historical perspective: understanding the faith shift toward beliefs.** Ilia Delio was trained in historical theology. She briefly reviews the shift from an experiential sense of God and faith in the early phase of Christianity to **an objectified, rational knowing during the rise of Scholasticism**. She explains the negative consequences of the rise of that form of religious scholarship this way:

With the rise of Scholasticism, when knowledge became an objective question, we abstracted it from the experience of things. And that objectification of knowledge did several things. One: it caused, in some ways, a separation of the elites—the knowers from the common person, the unlearned person. The second is that the objectification of knowledge left us spirituality bereft. It left [knowledge] orphaned with **no place for the experience of God and world**. So, you can see how theology becomes more objectified, and spirituality more internalized.

By the time we get to **the rise of science and the rise of modern philosophy**, we have this **idea that true knowledge is in the intellectually abstract, speculative way of knowing**. And spirituality is something one does privately, interiorly, personally. Then, it makes sense from that point on that what we're calling *trust*, the biblical theme of trust in surrender, moves into **a system of doctrine and a system of beliefs**. Then beliefs become principles. Instead of knowing experientially and trusting the knowing, it becomes something of a set of rules that you are to follow: "Believe and you'll be saved; if you don't believe then you're not going to be saved." Then even the beliefs themselves lack any sort of experience or anything deeper—it's only the do's and don'ts. **That type of knowledge is not transformative**; it is a set of beliefs encapsulated in a set of rules, a set of principles. All it does is keep the lid on the box, but it doesn't cause any great conversions. It doesn't cause any greater transformation in the human person.

Question 10: *How is it for you to think of your faith (or philosophical) tradition as developing on a trajectory—similar to the intellectual and emotional maturation of human beings? Do you find it helpful or threatening to consider that there is still room for that tradition to grow?*

11. **Education and the environmental crisis.** After criticizing standard forms of education that focus on “pouring information into the minds of young people, rather than enlisting their curiosity and their fascination—and their trust and their awe,” Ilia Delio talks about her own work in this regard:

One of my projects is looking at **education and its role in the environmental crisis** today. Because if there’s a crisis, it didn’t happen just now. It comes up because we face certain decisions. Look at how unaware we are, how **inattentive** to the environment today, how inattentive to our consumptive patterns and to our **ecological footprints**. That doesn’t seem to be diminishing. **It’s because we have educated for careerism, for professionalism, and for individualism.** It’s the “be all you can be” or “be number one” attitude.

Then education is not knowledge that deepens. In the medieval sense of education, the university was a mirror of the universe, and the idea was for the conversion of soul and the transformation of the person—a **deepening of personhood through knowledge**. That was the idea that knowledge would open one’s eyes and ears and heart and mind and attune one to the macrocosm, to the universe at large. **Now, it’s not knowledge; it’s only information.** And it’s information within highly specialized disciplines. So it’s not a university anymore; it’s a multiversity—it’s a multi-verse of disciplines.

Question 11A: *To what extent do you hold the faith traditions **responsible** (at least in part) for the environmental challenges of today? What about our educational institutions?*

Question 11B: *Where in today’s world and amid today’s institutions do you **see hopeful signs of change**?*

12. **Spirituality as ‘right relationship with reality’.** Another theme that Dowd keeps testing out on his guests is his zeal for encouraging ‘**spirituality**’ and **spiritual practices to be evaluated by their outcomes**. Do they actually lead practitioners to interact in more wholesome ways with other humans and with nature? Dowd thus redefines spirituality as that which leads to “right relationship with reality.” He comments to Ilia Delio, “If spiritual practices are simply an end in themselves, that’s very different than using them as tools so that we can be in a deeper communion with reality, with God, with all of our relationships, with the soil and the land and everything else.” Delio responds,

Spirituality is not a thing in itself. It’s really an orientation of being in the world. And the question is: If we don’t have the consciousness of spirituality, then what are we oriented towards? That’s the whole thing. **As an unconscious being in the world, we lack a compass that points us to a deepening of relatedness. We have an inattentiveness to the things of nature.** We have an inattentiveness to the human person. And we wind up with an isolationism and **a privatism that’s very unhealthy** to the human community and to the world and to the Earth at large.

Question 12: *What is your sense of **what ‘spirituality’ is about**—and what it is for? Specifically, to what extent should faith traditions orient toward helping adherents do as Dowd*

*suggests: to improve the quality of all their relationships (including their relationship with Nature)? What about spirituality having a role as Delio suggests: helping us become **more attentive and caring** in our relating to other humans and to Earth?*

13. **Transhumanism and the evolution of technology.** This is the only interview in the series that uses the term “transhumanism. Ilia Delio defines this term in an evolutionary way that directly links it to technology. She says,

Transhumanism in its broadest concept means that we humans are going somewhere, because there’s a whole transcendence within evolution itself. Things **move towards greater complexity and convergence**. Technology is a very interesting development. There’s a whole body of work on technology and religion. Although we find it in other cultures besides Western culture, the type of technology that we have inherited grows largely out of Western Christianity.

Given her fascination with the future evolution of the human and the role of technology, pondering the role of the Internet—for good and ill—is an important part of Delio’s research focus. She says,

Is technology increasing our relatedness? Or is it making us more isolated and privatized?

Finding an answer is very interesting. There’s something that’s happening to us through technology that, on one hand, you can say it’s a new type of spirituality because it’s nurturing a new type of relatedness within the human community. But on the other hand, it’s also a type of relatedness that’s at our control. **If we don’t want to be related, we press the ‘off’ button.** There are no demands. There’s no responsibility of relatedness: if I don’t really want to do this anymore, I can just log off. The whole idea of **virtual relatedness** lacks an organic ecological connectedness.

Technology can be a help towards a greater unity in the universe, but it also can lead to **a greater fragmentation** of life in the universe.

Question 13: *What role does **the Internet play in your own life** — for good or ill? And how has that shifted over time? And what are your hopes and fears about the role of the Internet for younger generations?*

Question 13B: *Is there **a role for faith institutions** in helping shape how its adherents relate to technology? For example, do religious education programs have a role to play in rounding out the **social skills and face-to-face relating of children**?*

14. **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and the role of technology.** In the first half of the 20th century, a Jesuit priest who was also a paleontologist developed some expansive ideas about **the trajectory of evolution** in the **past** and where it was leading in the **future**. Many point to Teilhard’s visionary writings as anticipating the Internet in a beneficial way. Ilia Delio has studied the work of Teilhard, and she draws upon his perspective in evaluating the role of technology today. In this interview she says,

We know that the universe could go on for billions of years. **I’m not sure if we, as a species, are evolving ourselves out of existence or evolving into a greater existence.** Teilhard de Chardin

was very attracted to technology—the computer was coming of age in the fifties when he was writing—and he saw that **technology could bind us together** and move us to the next stage of evolution, that technology could unify us towards a deepening of our humanity. **Teilhard was leaning towards a networking through technology but not a divorce from the natural world**, or a divorce from the Bios, from the human species. I do think he was on to something that could be helpful to us: that **technology could actually help usher in the next stage of evolution**—as long as we do not allow it to take over us; as long as we are not co-opted by it.

Question 14A: *To what extent does viewing **the rise of technology within the full sweep of evolutionary time** help you feel more trusting (or perhaps more wary) of how it may unfold?*

Question 14B: *To what extent **do you feel yourself to be part of the flow of evolution**? Do you feel moved to participate, as best you can, in the changes moving all around you? Do you feel called to act, even if in only a small way, and even if there is no guarantee that your participation will make a difference?*

Question 14C: *What **role should faith institutions play** in encouraging their adherents to get out and make a difference in the world — and to never give up hope? Specifically, **is there a positive role for Christianity** and Christians to play in working in partnership with the intrinsic forces of change at this time? Might it be helpful to consider, “What would **Teilhard** think and do if he were alive today?”*

15. **The cross and Christ in cosmic perspective.** If you have listened to or read more than a few of the interviews in this series, you might be wondering when one of the experts will actually bring an evolutionary and cosmic understanding to two of the central features of traditional Christian faith: Christ and the cross. Two of Ilia Delio’s eleven books have titles demonstrating her enthusiasm in this regard: a 2011 book is called *The Emergent Christ*. An earlier book she titled, *Christ in Evolution*. For her, Jesus is far more than an exemplary man of values, born at a particular time in a particular place. Rather, Delio points to “the Christ” as the very reason that God created the Universe, and she sees

... the whole evolutionary process as a cruciform process, **the cross spread out over fourteen billion years of evolution**. Despite the forces of resistance, this movement higher or this movement forwards, towards unity, is the struggle upward to the great YES, to greater unity.

Here are the rest of her extensive remarks:

As a **Franciscan**, I don’t hold to the belief that there was a perfect paradise and then we sinned and then Jesus came. That has been a traditional way of thinking about things. But there’s a whole line in the Christian tradition which had another way of thinking, and that is that **Christ was first in God’s intention to love**.

For the Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus, **God is love. From all eternity God willed to share that love with another, and therefore the Christ was willed to grace and glory prior to any sin**. Scotus was basically saying that Christ is first in God’s intention to love—and that in order for Christ to come, there had to be a Creation. This idea of thinking that **Christ is the whole reason**

for the universe rather than only an afterthought in the universe is, some people think, grounded in the letter to the **Colossians** (the first chapter) and the letter to the **Ephesians**, where the author speaks in Colossians of Christ as “the head of Creation.” In that sense, when we think of **Christ as the beginning of Creation**, Christ is the word of God. And so that very word spoken by God is a word of love. In that word of God spoken in love is the world.

From the very beginning of that spoken word is Christ. **The whole evolutionary Creation, from its beginning, is intended for Christ. By that I mean that it’s intended to be a personalized unity in God, in love.** When we speak about Christ, we’re talking about the word of God in love, our word in flesh, the word of love enfleshed. That’s what we mean by Christ—or what I mean by Christ. If we think about love incarnated all along, then **from the Big Bang onward, in every quark and every photon, in every hydrogen atom and in everything that’s emerging, the whole evolutionary universe is that word of love being incarnated.**

The whole incarnation is this evolutionary ascending process, fourteen billion years. Then, Jesus of Nazareth, the God who’s being incarnated all along, bursts forth. **The birth of Jesus is a new big bang in the history of the universe**, as God explodes this love that’s been incarnating all along, now appearing in the flesh in a way that can be known. What we have to say first about Jesus—and I say this quite frequently because we’ve had a simple understanding of Jesus—for example, Christ is not Jesus’ last name. *[laughter]* We need first to say that in this person Jesus, the fullness of God is revealed. And we don’t mean to say that Jesus Christ is the same as Jesus, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Christ, which, in fact, is making Jesus another individual—as if he’s the great exceptional individual. But by saying that Jesus is the Christ, we’re saying that **in the humanity of Jesus, this God of love has burst forth**—has exploded in Creation. That means that what took place in the humanity of Jesus now is a paradigm for all humanity and the whole cosmos because **all of our humanity recapitulates the whole evolutionary cosmos.**

If Jesus is the Christ, that means, first of all, we have a direction in the universe in that life of Jesus. **If we believe in the Resurrection, we know that this universe is about new creation**, it’s about life, and it’s about healing and wholeness. The humanity of Jesus, our humanity as well, means that **we too are the Christ.** That’s something that we simply have not preached about enough and have not really prayed about and explored enough. **There is no Jesus Christ who’s floating up in the heavens that we’re going to follow.** Jesus is the Christ, and we too are part of that Christ—in fact we and all of the cosmos supporting that Christ, because it’s the Word made flesh.

But **we who are baptized into Christ have made a particular public commitment now to live this Christ in the universe** in a particular way—to enflesh love is to be homemakers. I see Jesus’ life as homemaking, and the role of Christ is one of homemaking in the universe. It’s not that we’re saved, but that salvation—from the Latin, *salus*, meaning health—**salvation is for a healthy personal life, for a healthy planet, for a healthy universe, for a healthy cosmos.** Health and wholeness are what the mystery of Jesus Christ is about.

To be Christian today is to be on the way toward health and wholeness, to being whole within our own lives, to being healers and homemakers in our communities, to being human and homemaking in the Earth Community. And that homemaking is then the lived reality of Christ—Christ coming to be born, then, in the heart of the universe into and through our lives. Again, following **Teilhard de Chardin**, the whole evolutionary universe is an ongoing birthing of Christ.

That means that we continue that birthing process into our life. **Christ must be born in us for Christ to be at the heart of this evolutionary Creation.**

At this point the host, Michael Dowd, responds, “**Wow! Do I envy your students!** I can’t even begin to tell you how much what you just shared resonates.”

Question 15A: *What came up for you in Ilia Delio’s extemporaneous description of what the Christ, the cross, and salvation mean in a **cosmic and evolutionary context**? Especially, were there any breakthroughs for you — any new and important insights?*

Question 15B: *The title of this episode begins with the term, “**The Emergent Christ.**” This is also the title of Ilia Delio’s 2011 book. What is your sense of what she means by that term?*

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