

Joan Chittister

“God and the Evolutionary World”

Episode 36 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Joan Chittister is a Benedictine sister who co-chairs the Global Peace Initiative of Women. She is a columnist for *National Catholic Reporter* and *Huffington Post* and a prolific author. A *Publishers Weekly* review characterizes her as “well known in Catholic circles for her willingness to take on anybody—even the Pope—in defense of women's rights.

HIGHLIGHTS

Joan Chittister offers **the most complete menu of traditional and possible concepts of (and metaphors for) God** of anyone in this series, while advocating for her own God image that celebrates “**evolutionary theology.**” She **boldly critiques not only male- and power-dominant images of God but also, what she calls, “merit theology.”** Thus she favors a view of human freedom and fallibility wherein, as with the evolution of life, **mistakes unleash the potential for future growth.** Humanity both emerges from natural evolutionary processes and is called to **participate in co-creating (with God) a vibrant and socially just future.** In telling her life story, Chittister puts a positive spin on a heartbreaking misfortune of her childhood, thereby encouraging her audience to **re-intepret their own life stories in ways that evoke gratitude.**

This episode joins the conversation with Gail Worcelo (episode 25) in demonstrating the **activism of faith-driven Catholic nuns who courageously defy institutional constraints** in their quest for a faith congruent with science and supportive of a better world. It is also a superb platform for exploring **developmental stages of faith,** especially as evident in the menu of past and new God concepts, formulations of human purpose, and interpretations of **the two origin stories in the book of Genesis.** Although atheism is not dealt with per se, Joan’s insistence on **morality being a natural emergent of biological and cultural evolution** can help the faithful overcome a widespread prejudice against individuals for whom scripture and religious belief are no longer relevant. Overall, this interview is **unsurpassed for demonstrating how the discoveries of science add value to religious perspectives, while urging religions (and religious interpretations) to evolve.**

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This conversation is highly recommended for all religious and secular groups for whom liberal theology and liberal values are worthy topics for thought and discussion. Conservative (as well as moderate and liberal) Catholics would benefit from exposure to this highly visible feminist and social activist nun. While Chittister's concrete and pointed style of speaking makes this interview riveting and fully accessible to lay audiences, seminarians and the academically inclined will find this episode packed with well formulated and precisely stated responses to some of the thorniest theological conundrums, e.g., theodicy, free will, God's power, human purpose, and how to interpret the origin stories of Genesis in ways that keep those stories relevant in this age of science. Note: Joan Chittister's insistence that seemingly "radical" nuns are actually honoring long Catholic tradition can best be understood if this episode is paired with that of Sr. Gail Worcelo.

BLOG COMMENTS

Patricia Paz says:

I just had such a wonderful time listening to Joan. No wonder: She has a PhD in communication. She worded the evolutionary God in such a clear and beautiful way! Her conversation was full of light and insight, and she helped me put into words my own intuitions about God and the ongoing creation, which fully involves me in it. Thank you for this wonderful series!

Richard Powell says:

This talk was another bright spot in the series for me, touching on a topic which I have been particularly curious to hear about but which, equally curiously, hasn't been as clearly articulated as Joan did in this conversation. The topic? Just how radically different the evolution story is from the orthodox view, and yet paradoxically how we can reconcile this difference with the truths embedded in Christianity.

Here Joan helped ease my mind when she talked about evolution being the outcome of uncountable mistakes over the course of millions of years of evolution. Sin has something to do with growth. Evil is natural. We have to live with nature, not destroy it. Mutations are rarely helpful, and those that didn't provide any advantage didn't get passed on, but those that did provide advantage, did get passed on — and they are us.

We are a collection of the changes that stuck. And now, with the evolution of our species occurring largely on the cultural level, we have a more rapid rate of change and can relax in the knowledge that the most helpful cultural elements will be carried forward. How I hope that is so!

The second significant point was about free will. The decisions we make are significant. This is a point that I discuss often with my sons. One of my sons argues that much of who we are and what we do is predetermined in our genes and that there is a tremendous amount

of evidence (physical laws, twin studies, controlled psychological studies, and patterns of human history) to suggest that we are largely creatures without free will in a world running down like a ticking clock. We have a destiny and we can't change it. The other son and I have an intuition that our free will isn't just an illusion, but we don't have the arguments to support it. This is an area I would like to hear more about, particularly Joan's idea of ongoing creation instead of fate.

I also really liked the idea of "growth vs perfectionism." This is another deeply intuitive assertion with significant ramifications. Along these lines was the suggestion that we participate in God's life, that we are supported by, growing out of and growing into, or transformed together into, God. Radical idea to me; old as the hills to Joan, apparently.

But perhaps the warmest gem in this talk was the revelation that naming the animals was about attaching to animals as companions so that they are brought, as it were, into our families; rather than the oft-assumed message of taking power over them. Such a simple but powerful shift in perspective. I also found comfort in the reassurance, "It's going to be alright because it's in the mind of God."

KEYWORD TOPICS

God (updating our concepts of), **Catholic schooling**, **Roman Catholic sisters**, **Vatican II**, **theology** (as always developing), **leadership**, **life purpose**, **spiritual maturity** (as more important than beliefs), **"merit theology"** (criticism of), **stages of spiritual development**, **obedience/disobedience** (to Church rules and authority), **God of love**, **God's plan** (critique of), **Creation** (as emerging naturally), **emergence**, **nihilism** (critique of), **human purpose**, **evil**, **free will**, **sin** (as opportunities for growth), **growth v. perfection**, **rationality**, **natural catastrophes**, **great earthquake of Lisbon**, **God's punishment** (critique of), **earthquakes and tsunamis** (as natural), **evolutionary theology**, **maleness of God** (critique of), **social action** (as a requirement of the gift of free will), **evolution as "promise and possibility"**, **moral responsibility** (derived from a theology of evolution), **Sallie McFague**, **Joanna Macy**, **feminist theology**, **Genesis stories** (as stewardship and relationship), **the purpose of life**, **the future Church**, **history of change in the Church**, **nuns** (as driving the evolutionary theology movement), **Benedictism**

BIOGRAPHY

Joan Chittister is a lifelong Benedictine sister of Erie, Pennsylvania, who co-chairs the Global Peace Initiative of Women, a partner organization of the United Nations. A columnist for *National Catholic Reporter* and *Huffington Post*, she has received numerous awards and recognition for her work for justice, peace, and equality, especially for women in the Church and in society. In December 2009 she spoke at the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne, Australia, and has appeared with the Dalai Lama at Emory University's Summit of

Religion, Conflict, and Peace-building.

She is the author of over 40 books, ten of which have won Catholic Press Association Awards (the latest 2011: *God's Tender Mercy*). Several have been co-written with leaders of other faiths, e.g., *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia for All That Is* (coauthored with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams), and *The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (coauthored with Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Murshid Saaadi Shakur Chishti). Titles reflecting her feminist theology include *Women, Spirituality, and Transformative Leadership* and *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*.

Sister Joan received her masters degree from the University of Notre Dame and her doctorate from Penn State University in Speech Communications Theory. She was an invited fellow and research associate at St. Edmund's College, Cambridge University. Founder and director of Benetvision (a resource and research center for contemporary spirituality), she has served as prioress of her Benedictine community. Currently, Sister Joan is helping to develop a program to enable lay groups to live Benedictine spirituality in a contemporary way. Her website is <http://www.joanchittister.org/>.

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO

1-hour video, "The Divine Feminine: The Foundation of the Abrahamic World"
http://fora.tv/2011/07/25/Joan_Chittister_The_Divine_Feminine#fullprogram

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and more can be added) at the following url:
<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/joan-chittister-god-and-the-evolutionary-world>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Faith despite the "unpredictability" of life.** Joan Chittister chooses this fragment of her life story to exemplify a major theme in her entire faith journey:

When we talk about the faith journey, in my life it began at a very early age. **My father died when I was three.** At that moment, the whole notion of dealing with **an unpredictable life** became a kind of a hallmark of the assumption that we don't get to a point where life is always sound, secure, under our control—that **God is not the magic act in the sky**— that things happen to you whether you would want that or not.

Question 1A: *If you were to **choose one crucial moment or pattern in your childhood or young adulthood that became a shaping theme for your entire spiritual life or way of being in the world, what would it be? And how has its influence carried through to today?***

Question 1B: Later in the interview, we see how Joan revisits the theme of an “unpredictable” life, which she imprinted on in childhood and which she portrays in a **fully positive way**. “**Unpredictability**” led her to dispense with any notion that God has a pre-determined plan for the world or for individual lives. Instead, the future is wide open, free will is real, and it is the purpose (and joy!) of each of us to participate co-creatively in bringing forth the future.

*With that in mind, now **consider again how you responded to the previous question**. Did you give the youthful experience you selected a positive spin? Was it something that shaped your character or propelled you forward in life in a way you can now be **grateful** for? If not, can you **fashion an additional interpretation** of that very same event that does evoke gratitude, that showcases your human capacity to transform setbacks into new possibility and strengths of character?*

2. **Attractions of monastic life for Catholic women of Joan’s era.** In telling the story of her faith journey, Joan helps us see why the monastic life was very attractive to her. She recalls,

I became one of those **devout Roman Catholic children** in a Catholic school who learned from the sisters— who were, of course, always above God; **the sisters** came first, God came second [*laughter*]*—and somehow or other, I believed every word that came out of their mouths and saw in them both piety and strength, both commitment and service. It was a magnet for me. I saw them as very good women, holy women, strong women in a society that did not then celebrate the strength of women.*

You won’t be surprised to know that **I entered the monastery at the age of sixteen**. I’ve been in that particular monastery ever since, literally all my life. The importance of that is an understanding that I spent a good portion of my life in a **pre-Vatican II theological world, and then I was confronted with a period in my life when it became very clear that theology is not static**. Theology develops; it was developing right under my faith. I began in my late twenties, early thirties to develop with that. I began to understand that theology—good theology—is more about questions than it is about old answers. It became **a really dynamic experience of the spirit of God, alive and fresh in life now**.

Question 2A: For Joan, her childhood exposure to “holy and strong” women, and her young adult experience with the dynamism of Vatican II powerfully shaped her life. *Given your understanding of **the options available for women in the 50s and 60s**, can you sense why signing up for the monastic life might have been compelling? Have you heard from other Catholics of Joan’s generation about **the excitement of the Vatican II era**? Please elaborate.*

Question 2B: [Studies](#) indicate that **Catholic women’s monastic communities that have modernized** in dress and community life have lost much of their ability to attract young

women. On the other hand, those communities that have **re-established traditional dress and daily religious activities for nuns** are attracting younger members. *Why do you think this is so?*

3. **Openness of theology; the exhilaration of science and new discoveries.** Joan Chittister talks about the excitement she felt in having **beliefs that were open to change**. She says,

I can honestly attest to that kind of open-souledness in me and my community during those years and in women religious in particular. I became fascinated by the parallel, but perhaps incompatible, notions—at least as defined by some circles—of **science** itself. On the one hand, we are learning things that never crossed our minds in any kind of formal education. On the other hand, we are **asking questions that up until that time had been considered closed**, if not final. I found the dynamic of those two issues life-giving, grace-giving, exciting. I was not frightened at any level by any of it. I could feel—literally feel—**a new presence of God that was fresh** and open and beckoning. There was more!

Question 3: This dialogue with Joan Chittister exemplifies, perhaps more than any other dialogue, that **the seeming conflict and oppositional ways of knowing of faith and science can be exhilarating rather than simply challenging**. For Joan, merely “reconciling” faith with science is not on her agenda. *To what extent do you regard the necessity to bring faith and evidence, religion and science, into alignment as **more a delight than a chore**? Please elaborate.*

4. **Leadership as evoking questions, not commanding answers.** Joan Chittister has spent a portion of her time in religious community as the leader of it. Here she explains the style of leadership that emerged for her during that tenure:

I found myself in some positions in the order, such as prioress to the community, where I felt it required me **not to answer questions, but to enable the group to ask them**. Remember, I had a PhD in communication theory and social psychology, and so I saw leadership as an obligation to help the group to ask these questions—**to be willing to face what was coming before it got there, so that you were prepared to deal with it when it happened**. That’s really the whole faith story. It’s a story that’s incomplete, but it is a story that I believe deepened my faith—deepened it in personal ways, in ways that I could never have foreseen. It took the catechism and blew the lid off that kind of thing, and left me face to face with **a God who was tomorrow and not yesterday**.

Question 4: *What is your response to Joan’s experience of leadership? Notably, if you can recollect having experienced in your life the kind of leadership that Joan describes, how did that work for you?*

5. **How evolution affects our concepts of God and our sense of life purpose.** Joan Chittister explains,

If what **science** tells us about evolution is . . . that evolution is basic to the nature of nature, *then who is God now*? If this is the way nature really works (and we know that and have some hard evidence that this is true of the physical world), then what does that say about what had been our definition of God?

And then, what does it say about **the purpose of my life**? I knew what it was in second grade: keep the rules, keep the rules. Whatever you do, you are walking life over a fiery pit on a razor's edge. And you don't have much chance, kid! Fall one way or the other, and it's over.

What if there's no fiery pit? What if God doesn't have a little black box on my life with a set of rules inside of it that only God knows and that I'm supposed to go through life figuring out? Who is this guy? And what's that relationship to me in my life? I think those are the major questions that I deal with spiritually on this issue.

Later, Joan re-states these points as **two key questions**, which are also two of the key questions in this whole series of dialogues:

*How does this evolutionary understanding of reality, that we gain through a whole range of sciences, enhance or expand or enrich or challenge or threaten or shift **our understanding of God**, God's nature, or how we relate to God? And then the other question is: How does that impact my understanding of **my own purpose**—my own calling—my own role in this larger body?*

Question 5A: *How has an understanding of the evolutionary origin of this universe and its ongoing development **affected your understanding of God**?*

Question 5B: *How has an understanding of the evolutionary origin of this universe and its ongoing development **affected your understanding of your life purpose**?*

Question 5C: *Remembering that Joan spoke of leadership as **evoking questions** more than offering answers, **how open were you to the two previous questions upon entering this endeavor, and how open now**?*

Question 5C: *Has your experience thus far in this Evolutionary Christianity series caused you to make some **shifts** in either (a) **your concept of God**, or (b) your sense of **life purpose**? Or do you find yourself becoming more confident than ever in how you thought prior to this series?*

6. **Spiritual maturity v. beliefs.** Joan Chittister says,

I believe that history and experience will confirm the fact that **it's our idea of God that is the measure of our spiritual maturity**. In other words, it isn't *belief* in God that's unique to us. All peoples of all eras have all found their way to God as an answer to the unanswerable in life. Belief is not unique; it's universal.

Question 6: *What is your response to Joan's statement?*

7. **An energetic critique of "merit theology."** Joan Chittister says,

If I believe that God is the manipulator of the universe that I must manipulate in order to get through life, then I'm talking about something like **"merit theology."** *How do you get to heaven?* You go to

mass so many times a year. *How do you get to heaven?* You don't eat meat on Fridays. *How do you get to heaven?* You say so many rosaries. *How do you get to heaven?* **You keep the rules; you jump through liturgical hoops.** You figure out the rules of the game. You make sure you have all of them and do them perfectly.

What's the problem with that? Most of us function exactly there for most of our lives. The problem, spiritually, is that **law-keeping** doesn't necessarily provide much of a sense of **meaning** in life. Did God mean anything for my life, except keeping a set of rules? And whose rules are they? And who decided? Where did those rules come from?

Question 7: *To what extent do you agree with Joan that moving beyond a kind of “merit theology” is a good thing? To what extent have you done so yourself? And, if you have, where do you derive your sense of right and wrong – and your incentive to do the right thing – if you no longer subscribe to a form of “merit theology”?*

8. Inappropriate concepts of God. Joan Chittister offers **the most complete menu** of traditional and possible concepts of God that anyone has offered in this series.

I'm not spiritually better because I believe in God. The least educated peasant in the most remote part of the planet believes in some kind of god. **It's not belief that's unique. It's the kind of God** that I believe in personally—privately—that has something to do with my own spiritual development.

If God is a **god of wrath**, that doesn't have much to do with love. Where is this **God of love** that the scriptures talk about? **If God is the local magician**, then is anything predictable? Is anything found? Is anything worth doing? On the other hand, **if I'm remote to God** because God is remote to me, what am I left with? What is the definition of this God? It's **God the potentate, God the puppeteer, God the persecutor**: the one who's **testing**, the one who's **teasing**. Most of all, God is the **mighty male** in which no sense of womanhood exists. A wag wrote once, “First God created us, then we created God.”

The fact of the matter is, **all of those things are just graven images of ourselves**. That is just myself—my human self—writ large: the **God of power**, the **God of irrational rationality**, the God who tweaked and moved and pressed and prodded and monitored and watched. Those make mockeries of the God of scripture: the **God who is the fullness of life** and wants fullness of life for us, the **God of love**.

Question 8: *To what extent did you appreciate the list of **unhelpful** concepts of God that Joan identifies? To what extent do you agree with her choice of God-concept: God as “the fullness of life” and “the God of love”? Overall, what do you see the word ‘God’ pointing to? And how do you interpret or understand or experience ‘the divine’?*

9. Creation from an evolutionary perspective. Joan Chittister says,

Evolution left us with two big issues. We had to go back and look again at the traditional definition of Creation, the definition we had before science discovered for us this marvelous new notion of Creation. The traditional notion of Creation was that everything on Earth had been created

separately, uniquely, individually, discretely. **Evolution says, creation emerges**; it didn't all come finished. . . .

Evolution says that creation is about **the incomplete moving toward completeness**. It is not about uniqueness. It's about **ongoing development** that is itself, unique. So then you have a second question, don't you? The people who fear evolution and the science of evolution say: *Well, if you're going to tell me that's the way it is, then we're just spawned for nothing. There's no purpose. We're here for the sake of nothing and we have nowhere to go.* These are the people who began in the sixties—the late fifties and the sixties—when they saw this science emerging, who said God is dead; God is passé, and life is purposeless.

I can't say that. I don't think that.

Question 9: *What is your response to Joan's rendition of an evolution view of Creation?*

10. **Humanity as co-creators with God.** Joan Chittister says,

With evolutionary theology, we are co-creators of the universe. God is sharing God's power with us and providing everything that we need to make this world **emerge** in better and better forms. We become **participants in achieving the fullness of life** by selecting and adapting ourselves.

Question 10: *What is your response to Joan's sense of humanity as co-creators with God?*

11. **Natural catastrophes are not God's punishment.** Joan Chittister says,

To this day, you can hear people say after a divorce: *'What did I do to deserve this?'* After the **death of a child**: *'What is wrong with me? How have I sinned?'* That lingering notion that God is the God who is out there making sure that we are properly **punished or persistently tested** to prove our faith. Now, **evolution tells us** that it is the nature of nature, for **earthquakes** to happen. We see it in **tsunamis**. We have certainly seen it recently in Haiti. We know now that something we are not yet able to trace apparently, or to predict, is **part of the natural order of things**.

Evolutionary theology says, "This seeding of life: God seeded life in the universe and allows it to work its way out naturally." If you and I build a seven-million-dollar house on a beach in Malibu, should we really wonder that we might suffer from floods? Or should we really get up in the morning and say, "What did I do that God would allow my house to be taken down in surges and waves?"

Question 11A: *To what extent have you embraced a **fully naturalistic understanding** of the causes of natural catastrophes?*

Question 11B: *Have you ever been on the receiving end of **solace** offered by a well-meaning person, along the lines of "It is God's will"? If so, how did you feel? If not, have you heard stories of others who have felt injured by similar statements?*

Question 11C: *When you read of **sports stars** humbly attributing their victories to God, or **survivors of airplane crashes** attributing their survival to God's special blessing for them (implying that God chose not to spare all those who did die), how does it make you feel?*

Question 11D: *Have you ever felt that **your good fortune** in some particular instance was a special blessing from God — perhaps a reward to you, or bestowed upon you so that you could accomplish some component of God’s plan for you yet unfinished? Overall, is this sensibility a beneficial attitude? How might it be embraced without doing harm to oneself or others?*

12. **Free will v. God’s power.** Joan Chittister says,

When we look at **the question of free will in traditional theology**, we have a real problem. If God really is all-knowing and God knows everything that’s going to happen, how can you say we have free will? How can we possibly change that? And yet, in **evolutionary theology**, it is perfectly logical, I think, to argue that God gave free will to all of human life and all of nature **so they could each become their best**. So that we could make choices that are significant—not only for ourselves, but for others. What God knows is that we do have the right and the responsibility to do those things. The better our personal decisions in life, the greater Creation becomes.

Question 12: *Is this question of free will v. God’s power something that you have ever pondered yourself? If so, what solution did you arrive at, and do you still find it satisfying? On the other hand, if the topic is new for you, do you find Joan’s treatment of it helpful? If yes, how so? If not, what was missing for you?*

13. **The gift of free will and the requirement for social action.** Quite a few of the speakers in this series wrestle with the question of free will. Joan Chittister, who is well known for her social activism, speaks of free will in a way that bolsters her commitment to act. She says,

In evolutionary theology free will is key. We have free will—that’s the problem. God has indeed seeded this universe with free will. The decisions we make are crucial. **We can’t sit back** and let the politicians in Washington decide what this country and this world will be like. We can’t just hope that nuclear weapons will go away and not destroy the planet. We can’t sit in front of our televisions and “tsk-tsk” about children with big bellies who are starving. We have free will. **We have a responsibility to go on creating God’s Creation in the best possible world.**

Question 13: *What is your response to Joan’s statement — that is, how do you think about free will and choice and what it means to be responsible?*

14. **“There’s great moral responsibility in a theology of evolution.”** Joan Chittister speaks forthrightly on why moral responsibility does not require traditional theology. She says,

There’s great moral responsibility in a theology of evolution. It is not an immoral or amoral view or life. It brings us to confront the ultimate immorality. That’s huge. Without it, you can, of course, become a very self-defined holy isolate. All of this is somebody else’s business; all of it is somebody else’s regard. I feed my cats; I talk to the neighbors; I mow my grass; I ignore the rest of this stuff. It’s all somebody else’s business, and I deal with it by not dealing with it. I think that **a theology of evolution demands more than that.**

Question 14A: *If Joan Chittister asserts that a **theology of evolution**, in a sense, “demands” moral action in the world, do you think she would agree with the proposition that **atheists** can be moral individuals, too? Why or why not?*

Question 14B: *When you hear or read about a religious person **denigrating atheism** for its lack of moral values, how does this make you feel? Do you generally agree or disagree with such a viewpoint?*

Question 14C: *Overall, if it is indeed possible for someone to be “**good without God**” (that is, without otherworldly or supernatural beliefs), then where do morals come from? And how is it possible for “**evolution theology**” to deliver a robust and socially beneficial sense of moral values?*

15. **Sin as opportunities for growth.** Joan Chittister does not shy away from speaking directly on some of the theological issues that are often challenging to Christian nonliteralists. Notably, on the issue of sin she says,

In traditional theology, sin dooms you to eternal punishment and distance from the God of life. But the interesting thing is that **in evolutionary theology, this whole notion of perfectionism simply disintegrates into dust and sand and fragments.** Perfectionism is not of the essence of evolution. Nature doesn’t work that way. **We evolve through trial and error**, through mistake, after mistake, after mistake—through adjusting to circumstances as they have developed in our lives—sin, error, mistakes. In evolutionary theology, these become **the patterns of growth** in life: that we can evolve into more tomorrow than we are today; we can learn today from today’s errors; and we can adapt and adjust to that. . . .

God in evolution becomes the God of ongoing creation—not a creative template or pattern or perfectionist model from the past. This is a God who has seeded all of life in the universe, who is letting that life work its way to God, including yours and mine. And who, as a result, is teaching us **to learn from our own errors, to forgive and understand other errors**, to do right and give justice, so that we are making our own world—that is God’s world—according to the designs of God for it, which is the fullness of righteousness. We’re allowed, and expected, and **we must go right on growing** all the way to the grave.

Question 15: *What is your response to **Joan’s perspective on sin**? Where do you agree — and where do you disagree or have a different way of arriving at your own viewpoint?*

16. **Growth v. perfection.** Joan Chittister has several times expressed the importance of **aiming for growth — not perfection.** She expressed this view in her statement on free will and again in her statement on sin. Here is another way that she expresses this viewpoint:

What I come out with at the end of **evolutionary theology is growth versus perfectionism**—a sense of ongoing creation. . . . God doesn’t decide. God supports and stands by as we grow. Keeping the past is not what we’re about—making the future better. So my theology of evolution is, **evolution is both promise and possibility.** It promises that we will keep on growing right up to the

measure of the fullness of the spirit of God. And my possibility is that I can participate. I can become a better self. **I can participate in making a better world**, and together we can all grow into God.

Question 16: *What is your response to Joan's preference for growth, not perfection?*

17. **God is not male.** Joan is well known for **advocating women's equality in both culture and the Church**. Given that this conversation series is about evolution, she is not focusing here on feminist concerns. Perhaps the most direct statement she makes is this:

Traditional theology and theologians have argued about **the maleness of God**. They argued back from male sperm. Since male sperm, they said, was the life-giving dimension of life (before they knew anything about the ovum, incidentally), then the male—the mighty male—becomes the essence of the spiritual life. The notion of female life, as being as fully demonstrative of the glory and creative power and presence of God, gets lost for centuries and centuries and centuries.

Question 17: *What is your response to Joan's criticism of exclusively male metaphors for God? And is this a topic you have thought much about previously? How, if at all, do you think about gender and God?*

18. **Reinterpreting the stories of Genesis.** Very few of the speakers in this series offer their interpretations of the Genesis stories in the Bible, nor have they pronounced whether or not those stories are worth focusing on in modern times. But Joan Chittister does. She speaks at length on this topic, first describing the interpretive results of “traditional theology”:

It has been, you realize, a **totally anthropomorphic, human-centered story of Creation**. Somehow or other everything else was inferior to this creation of human beings. The purpose of creating them, according to this interpretation of the **Genesis story**, is to give them “**power and dominion**,” translated as, *You can have anything and you can do anything with anything if you are the top of the line, if you are the crown of Creation*. The male is presented as the crown of Creation, instead of realizing that when scripture says, “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh”— *somebody just like me*, that is nature of our common humanity: that **we're made for one another, not she for him**.

Worse than that is the fact that we have, in a traditional theology, given very **short shrift to the second creation story**—the relationship story. **We've chosen a stewardship story and called it a power story—a dominion story**. And we have put that over the second story—over the relationship story, the companionship story—which, incidentally, scripture scholars tell us was actually the first creation story and later got moved and this one got put in its place. In the relationship story in Genesis . . . God brings **all the animals to Adam for naming**. The traditional exegesis of that, in a pre-evolutionary world, was that meant that God gave Adam power over all the animals. Naming gives power. I'm always fond of wondering if the people who hear that in our churches ever had children! And if they did, did they ever name them? and did they get any power over those kids by naming them? It doesn't make any sense!

Obviously, the story is saying, you weren't alone here. You have obligations. How do we show our relationship to animals? We name them. **We name the animals we take into our families—the ones we take responsibility for, the ones that we treat like small children among us.** These two stories have to be seen in concert, not separately—and one of them cannot be eliminated. **It's a stewardship story and a relationship story that really completes this whole notion of evolutionary theology.** We are responsible for our relationship to the rest of this Creation. And evolution says, *you must grow into it in such a way that you make it better.* The purpose of life emerges quite clearly: **the purpose of our life is the co-creation of the world.**

Question 18A: *Joan packs a lot of ideas into these few paragraphs. Begin by identifying the ideas that seemed **new** to you — and for each of these, whether you were attracted, confused, repelled, or had some other response?*

Question 18B: *Overall, what, if anything, do you wish to take on as your own from Joan's interpretation of the Genesis creation stories?*

19. **Future of the Church: hope, not despair.** Dowd asks Chittister how she sees the Church evolving to deal with the issues of the day. She responds,

The history of the Church is the history of change. The problem is that up until now, that history has been **a slow history.** It took us four hundred years after Martin Luther to admit, at the time of Vatican II, that selling relics was not a good business idea and that, somehow or other, we had made mistakes. We don't have four hundred years on this one. We have got to be, as a Church, immersed in these ideas and sustained by the sacramental until the answers to these ideas emerge and develop a synthesis. **That's why I never get discouraged.** That's why I don't despair. Every morning we get up, we're changing. What's in our control is to decide whether we will engage with these questions—or we will go on stonewalling them as if we can make them go away. They're not going to go away. We're all now in this great **Internet** soup—from the Pope to the smallest altar girl—and we're all dealing with the same questions that are coming into our houses through our newspapers and our computers and our televisions every day.

These questions are going to get answered. **In people's hearts those answers are coming very fast. The only question is: Will the Church be a loving guide through these issues, and itself grow in its own structure?** I believe it will. I have no doubt that the Spirit is working in the Church as the Spirit is working in the world. It's not easy and we must all be faithful—faithful to the God who's calling us; faithful to the values when sometimes structures change; faithful to our ideals and our concerns; faithful to one another. Fidelity and openness, often seen as opposites, are the only way through this: **fidelity to the ideals, fidelity to the sacramental, and openness to this emergence in an evolutionary world of new adaptations and new forms.** It's going to be alright. It's in the mind of God.

Question 19: *Whether you or not you are Catholic, and whether or not you are religious, to what extent does Joan Chittister succeed in generating in you some of the **hope and excitement** that permeate her little speech on the future of the Church? Please elaborate.*

20. **The role of the nuns in evolving the Church.** Michael Dowd and Joan Chittister talk about the role that Catholic nuns have played in the development of evolutionary theology. They say,

Michael: People have asked me where did this whole evolutionary theology, evolutionary spirituality movement begin? And I say, **the Catholic nuns have been driving this thing for a couple of generations**, or at least one generation. I learned about this from Sister Miriam MacGillis back in the mid-eighties. On this series we've got yourself and Sisters Mary Southard, Gloria Schaab, Ilia Delio, Gail Worcelo, and Linda Gibler: some amazing **radical nuns** at the cutting edge of how Christianity is evolving. It's really quite exciting to me.

Joan: Oh, Michael, that's your only error so far. **They're not radical; they're highly traditionalist**—all of us. That's what got us where we are. We are not where we are because we don't believe in what we were taught. We are where we are because we *do* believe it, and we have seen it get bogged down. When you believe in the Holy Spirit, you can't decide what year the Holy Spirit stopped working. Think of it!

Question 20A: *What is your response to Michael and Joan's little dialogue?*

Question 20B: *Have you encountered, through this series or any other venue, the ideas and work of **any of the other nuns** that Michael mentions? If so, please elaborate. If not, does your encounter with Joan Chittister's ideas here instill in you a desire to hear more about what these evolutionary nuns are saying and doing?*

Question 20C (Supplemental): *You may wish to reflect on and discuss this supplemental material:*

Defying the Vatican. The 20 August 2001 issue of *Time Magazine* included a report titled, "**A Nun's Dangerous Talk.**" It chronicled **the struggle between the Vatican and Joan's open advocacy for the ordination of women** within Roman Catholicism. Backed by a near-unanimous vote of her Benedictine sisters to stand by her decision to address the **First Annual Conference on Women's Ordination** (in June 2001), Joan (and her superior at the convent) interpreted her "obedience" vow as pertaining forthrightly to the decision of her community, and only to a lesser extent to the expressed will of the Vatican. The result: **Joan delivered her talk without repercussion** from the Vatican. The report is available online at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000569,00.html>

21. **Culminating remarks on the concept of God and the purpose of life.** Near the end of the dialogue, Joan Chittister reiterates in short and powerful statements two of the central themes of her interview. These are:

1. **"The purpose of life: growth into God."** She says,

The purpose of life, the evolutionary model tells us, is growth into God. We all—and all life, the scientists tell us—will eventually melt into God. That is the purpose of this planet. However many

years it lasts, when it dissolves it will become something else. That's the mystery of God. The **purpose of life is then the transformation of the self and the universe into God.**

2. "Evolution gives us a God big enough to believe in." She says,

Evolution has been, for me, a phenomenal piece of spiritual life and theological insight. It gives us a **God big enough to believe in.** Not a magician god, not a puppeteer god, not a teasing god, not a mythical god—this is a God who has allowed for the co-creation of the world and that gives us the responsibility to create that world equal to the God who created such life. I'm happy, spiritually, to have lived during this time.

Question 21A: *Joan Chittister is well known as a **powerful, outspoken, and energetic** woman. Reflect on and discuss **how the worldview expressed in these two statements would support and feed those aspects of her character and the strength of her faith.***

Question 21B: Perhaps more than any other speaker in this series, Joan Chittister is known for her **fierce advocacy for social justice**, especially concerning women's issues within the Church and, indeed, around the globe. Theological interpretation is for such advocacy; it is not an end in itself. She has delivered countless keynote speeches intended to stir up resolve and commitment among the listeners. Accordingly, she has become a master of rhetorical flourish. *So the question is this: **To what extent do you appreciate listening to worldview considerations such as these offered via rich and emotionally laden imagery?***

22. What does this "Evolutionary Christianity" series mean to you? At the end of the interview Joan Chittister comments on the Evolutionary Christianity series as a whole,

I want to say something to you personally, Michael. I don't know what it was in you or about you or as a result of your life that led you to start **this project**. I wrote a column yesterday, and I took this project as a model for the development of participation that we need on this planet at this time: enabling people—all people—to **listen in on a discussion that is being honest, that is given more to questions and to the pursuit of ideas than to the recitation of footnotes and somebody else's answers.** I want to thank you for that.

NOTE: The column Joan refers to is titled, "**Evolution Conference Invites Us All To a New Beginning.**" It appeared online in the 10 January 2011 issue of *National Catholic Reporter*, and is accessible here:

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/evolution-conference-invites-us-all-new-beginning>

Question 22: *Read the excerpt from her column (below) or the entire column at the url above. Then **reflect on and discuss** your sense of this "Evolutionary Christianity" series, to the extent that you have sampled the available episodes.*

Excerpt from Joan Chittister's *National Catholic Reporter* post

This month, for the first time, for instance, I got an invitation to participate in a project that simply

sprang up out of the heads of an evangelical minister, Michael Dowd, and his science-writer wife, Connie Barlow, that may turn out to be **one of the seminal public discussions of the year** — or more.

A group of ordinary people have launched a teleseminar series on “Evolutionary Christianity.” Their website, [found here](#), brings together **38 scientists and religious figures** of all ilk to consider **the effects of evolution on religious thought** and teaching, on what we have always been taught about things like **the nature of God and the purpose of life**. Some of these speakers you already know, perhaps, like Matthew Fox, Diarmuid O’ Murchu, Richard Rohr, Mary Southard and I. Others you may hear for the first time but will be glad you did, like John Polkinghorne, Philip Clayton, Gloria Schaab and Brian McLaren.

. . . It’s a collection of interviews on the subject with people who take the subject seriously and, in addition, apply it to their own lives and faith. They ask themselves **what is the place of God in an evolutionary world** and, on the other hand, what is God without evolution?

These people are saying all the things we’re all saying, asking all the questions we’re asking ourselves. They are simply thinking it through -- like us, but out loud.

Listen in, why don’t you? Eavesdrop a little. Help to bring so profound a spiritual question out of the closet. Because this is truly one of tomorrow’s questions.

This one will affect all our spiritual lives -- as well as the way we shape our souls, our catechisms, our churches and our world. **It’s discussions like this that will make us spiritual adults.**

From where I stand, **evolution and its real-life implications is a very exciting, very real, very present question**. It has to do with the kinds of issues that form the undercurrent of faith like “Did God really will the earthquake in Haiti?”

After all, evolution is a subject ninth grade science students already know more about than most of the adults in this world. It may be time for **the rest of us to catch up** with them. That would really be a ‘new beginning.’