

Ilia Delio

“The Emergent Christ and Evolutionary Catholicism”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 23 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith.](#)” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via [EvolutionaryChristianity.com](#), where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Ilia Delio](#) is our featured guest. [Ilia](#) is a [Senior Fellow at Woodstock Theological Center](#) at [Georgetown University](#) and author of [ten books](#), including [Christ in Evolution](#) and [Care for Creation](#), which won two Catholic Press Book Awards. She holds both a doctorate in pharmacology and a doctorate in historical theology. Her new book, [The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe](#), will be published in spring of 2011. Here, we discuss “The Emergent Christ and Evolutionary Catholicism.”

Host: Hello Ilia Delio, and thank you for joining in this conversation on Evolutionary Christianity.

Ilia: Good to be here.

Host: It’s good to have you. What I’d love for you to do at the start is to help our listeners really *get* who you are. Give us a sense of your life trajectory. How did you get to where you are now professionally and also intellectually?

Ilia: Okay. There are two things you should know upfront. I come from the [Franciscan](#) tradition and we are very incarnation-centered. Our way of life is really seeking Christ in the world and Christ in all things. I’m a scientist by training actually. Spent about over twenty years studying science, from a biology major and up to a doctorate in pharmacology. I was in brain and spinal cord research before I heard the call and left the world of scientific research for religious life—actually, for a cloistered monastery. I spent four years in a very strict traditional monastery—learned the art of prayer and how to plant a vegetable garden at the same time. *[laughter]*

Host: ... and you were in your mid-thirties or ...

Ilia: ... my late twenties. Then, a month after I finished my doctorate I literally left the world and went to the monastery. Everyone thought I had too much time in the lab [laughter] or maybe one too many chemicals.

Host: I'd love to ask you a little bit about that because one of the things that I'm interested in (and many of our listeners are too) is significant, transformative moments, or grace moments. I'd love to have you share about how that shift happened. What went on internally for you that led you in that direction?

Ilia: 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.

I finished my doctoral work, defended my dissertation, and then found the monastery. It was not a Trappist Monastery; it was a [Carmelite Monastery](#). I went to the monastery to go to the desert, but then I woke up in the desert a few years later, saying, “Oh my God, what am I doing here?!” [laughter] I think that's how God works in our lives. He gets us on an off-moment and then it's that strong polar attraction. Then He pulls us and then He gives us the freedom to make a choice: What do you want to do now? So, it was a good foundation because I knew very little about prayer, and the monastery was what I call a “greenhouse for God.” It was just that the whole milieu at the monastery was God-centered.

I learned a lot about slowing down. Being in school all those years, I was very oriented towards intellectual endeavors, and being in the monastery was a giving up of the intellectual side of things for a while and really focusing. This is when I became more attracted to the Earth. We did a lot of farming, a lot of growing our own vegetables, and I became more attentive of the natural love around me and of connectivity in the world that I was not really aware of even as a scientist. God has been good in giving me these experiences.

After that, I left the Carmelites to go to the Franciscans, because leaving the world was too much for me. I really like the world! [laughter] I needed to get back with people. So I was sent to live with the Franciscans by my superior. In religious life everything works by obedience. It wasn't a choice. She called me and then said, “This is where you're going to live.” I went to the

Franciscans, and I had a post-doctoral fellowship at Rutgers University. The Franciscans that I lived with were very much like the Carmelites, with a strong community life and a strong prayer life. When I went back to research, not as scientist but as a sister, I realized that by being in religious life my world had changed. My heart wasn't really in scientific research anymore. But the Franciscan way of life is really a following of Christ in the world and it really was appealing to me. The sisters asked if I wanted to study spirituality, and I had no idea what spirituality was. So I said, "Well, how about theology—because it just sounds like it has more substance to it." They said "fine" and sent me back to school.

I never even wanted to be a theologian quite honestly—I didn't know what a theologian was. *[laughter]* I was sent again under obedience, back to school. Got a master's degree at [Fordham University](#) and just loved it. I found theology very much like science in its approach to understanding problems and thinking through problems. My scientific background was actually helpful in my theological endeavors, even though I wrote all my theology papers like a scientist, which was not very helpful. *[laughter]* Since I was a natural, the sister said, "Why don't you just stay and get a doctorate?" I wound up getting [a doctorate in pharmacology](#) and [a doctorate in theology](#). It wasn't planned; it was only by the grace of God—and here I am, immersed in this world of science and religion.

Host: I love it when we've got people who really have immersed themselves on both sides of this thing that our culture often sees as a divide.

Ilia: Yes, this is so amazing! I am still amazed at the divide that's seen culturally and upheld by some. But even in my own experience, being in research science, we would talk about religion. It was never a subject that one would—especially in the world of science—many people would not make it public that they were believers. It was more rare than common. But we would often talk about religious topics or the question of God. It was not a foreign topic in our world of research science. Anyone really immersed in the world of science—I don't care what discipline they're in—you can't be immersed in that world and not experience a sense of awe for the ways the physical life in this universe flows. It's quite amazing. And at some point, if you're not going to name it God, you have to say it's a mechanism. There are few people that can be satisfied with "It's just a mechanism." Even if you want to say it's a mechanism, it's the most awesome mechanism that you can have!

Host: Right! I think mechanism is an unfortunate word. In some way it makes sense in terms of how it came into being in and why it is being used, but it still implies a machine—mechanism. And machines don't have a self-organizing dynamic in the way that living systems do. I know [Elisabet Sahtouris](#) has done a lot of thinking and writing about this—I found her work very inspiring on exactly this point—the difference between autopoietic or self-organizing systems and machines. They're hugely different and yet we're stuck with this—or at least feeling that at this point—we're stuck with language of mechanisms.

Yet, as one of our speakers, [Ian Lawton](#), pointed out, when you really *get* to what all

humans have in common: we all have pretty much the same experiences. We have experiences of joy, of exaltation, of grief, of sadness, of betrayal, of all the different things that humans have in common in terms of our experience. And we all engage in most of the same actions—not identically all the same—but the same bodies of actions. It's when we stepped into the realm of how we talk about our experiences, about how we interpret our experiences and about how we interpret our actions and the actions of others and what that means, then we get into places where we can have all these different perspectives and disagreements and arguments and theologies and philosophies.

Ilia: That's very true. I've done a bit of lecturing internationally, and wherever I go in the world I always say the human heart is one. Whatever language you're speaking, when you go beneath the surface of ideas and you go deeper into the sense of meeting people on the level of the heart, it doesn't matter what your language is or what your color is or what your religion is. 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.

Host: The first time that I ever heard that line of thinking—a heart of the cosmos—was [Brian Swimme](#) in his little volume, *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*. There he speaks about the cosmic principle of allurement and that in some very real way—perhaps in a mystical way, perhaps in a metaphorical way, in a *real* way nonetheless—that gravity and love are both expressions or dimensions of this cosmic force of allurement and that our language sees them as radically different but perhaps they're not. 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.

Ilia: Right! 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. We're rather stuck when you go back to this dichotomy between science and religion. We're stuck on an upper, a more superficial level of intellectual ideas. But the science and religion dialogue, as a dialogue, needs to go deeper into that place of love. In other words, that gravity of the soul in the universe that is metaphorically moving the sun and the stars is also moving people toward one another.

Host: Wow! What you're saying occurs to me as really fresh. I've not thought along those lines. It strikes me as like, "Wow, that's interesting!" I want to hear you go more deeply into that, but it also reminds me of the trajectory of life in the human realm. We keep finding ways of cooperating and entering into larger organizations of cooperation. Our circles of compassion

and empathy and care keep widening, as well. We've gone from where we cooperated among families and clans, and then later we learned to cooperate at the scale of tribes, and then later we learned to cooperate at the scale of chieftains and kingdoms, and so on. And now, we're cooperating with people all over the world—in many cases, with people our grandparents hated or feared. That a sense of cooperation and compassion and empathy is growing relates to what you were just saying in terms of this grounding of the human experience in our heartfelt relation. It's a relationship.

Iliia: It is. When we talk about God, what we're talking about is primordial relationality. That relationality is at the heart of universe and life in the universe. Even in emergent evolution—this will be [Teilhard's](#) idea—evolution is a movement towards [greater complexity and greater union](#). It's the law of complexity and convergence that we put forth. Life moves from more isolated entities toward greater unified entities, towards greater unity. That movement of evolution continues up into the present time. The fragmentation—in our relationships with others and with nature—that we speak about is a result of the resistance to any movement towards unity that moves in a linear fashion. Every movement towards unity bears with it some inertia or resistance—a struggle—because we are finite and limited beings.

You can, then, see 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. The desire from within the human heart, and from within the heart of the cosmos, for greater unity is, today, an evolutionary turning point. We're at a transitional point where the evolutionary push is towards greater unity. Technology is a big creative endeavor, in this way. But there's also resistance to unity. It's very interesting—especially in conscious human beings—we want unity, but we don't. And it's almost simultaneous because we're not sure what that union is going to mean for us. What does it mean when the walls of separation break down between religions or between cultures or between races? What happens when the enemy becomes the neighbor or the brother or sister?

We long for a cosmic family and I think that is written into the universe: that the universe is one, meaning that the planets and the stars turn together as one—a university. Originally, at a university knowledge was supposed to deepen our understanding of the stars and the planets turning together as one. We have moved away from that considerably in our education and in our understanding, but there is a sense of oneness that is written into us. It's our task to actualize that oneness. Our resistance to it is the reason for the fragmentation and this disparateness that we experience.

Host: 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 wholes 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.

Ilia: That's right. Every person is related to someone else and to something else. There's no person that enters into this creation as an isolated entity. We are social beings by our very nature—and that includes both our physical nature and our spiritual nature. Everything about us is relational. We are relational through and through.

Host: I want to come at that from a different angle, because what you shared earlier was really fascinating to me. You had immersed yourself in the sciences: in neurophysiology, studying the spinal cord, the brain, and the whole nervous system—which depends upon, which relies on, a deep level of thinking. Then you moved into a monastic phase where your focus was less on thinking, more on noticing. Noticing the soil, noticing your feelings, noticing the world around you. I'd love for you to speak as a neurophysiologist about the different brain functions between thinking and noticing, because really noticing is central to meditation. It's a large part of contemplation, and it's a different brain function than thinking. So if you could say a little about that, it'd be fascinating.

Ilia: I will put it this way: In my own experience, as I went from the world of research science into the world of theology, I actually at one point thought to myself, "I am switching sides of my brain." I really felt that being a scientist exercises one side of my brain. When I went into theology, I was asked to do theology from a different side. And I would take the left side and the right side (if you want to be that gross in comparison)—but here's the thing: The brain is a fascinating instrument and organ because it's very malleable and it's very adaptable. Whatever the brain is exposed to—whatever patterns—it will pick them up. And if the pattern is repeated successfully, the brain will then acquire that characteristic.

As a scientist, one is trained to think in a certain way, a very rational way: the scientific method and the use of mathematics. There's an abstractness, even though science itself is an empirical examination of things. But there's a certain—and maybe the focus here is on rationality. The scientist thinks in a rational way: If A causes B and B causes C, then A and C must be related. It's deductive. The brain gets organized and it gets patterned to think like that. I am a firm believer in brain plasticity. The brain is plastic, and the exercise of the brain, in a sense, determines the function of how we think and how we act.

As I went from that world of science and thinking in a more rational, deductive way, into the world of prayer, which was not so rational—when you're sitting with the same women every day, seven days a week, 365 days of a year—that is really not rational at all. *[laughter]* Once I thought, "This is crazy!" *[laughter]* In our prayers we are focused on attentiveness. Now it's really interesting because today we understand knowledge in a new way. We know it's not the

intellect alone that's the knowing process, but the *body* as part of the knowing process, as well.

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—and here is where the whole question of faith—you cannot trust that the question of faith rationally—it's not rational per se. There is what Kierkegaard called “the leap across the abyss of the absurd.”

As I reflect on my experience and religious life—I've been in this now for over twenty-five years—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.” There's something to that. In other words, the child is filled with wonder at life—the sense of awe. Everything bears with it something incredible. It's that type of experience that leads to a different type of knowing.

Again, in science the brain gets patterned by rational thinking. In the prayer life or the spiritual life, the brain is opened up to a different way of taking in the awesomeness of the data of the world. Now, that spiritual life is a little bit different from the life of a theologian. 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.

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. The one who knows, who can use reason—a reason now deepened by faith and by love—this one knows the world and the things in this world in a much deeper way. The brain is an amazingly flexible and open type of system.

Host: And it sometimes leads us in ways that our rationality finds problematic or challenging because there are deeper parts of our brain that have their own agenda: serving our survival and reproductive needs. One of the things I found so freeing about an evolutionary understanding of human nature is that it not only gives me a far deeper, more this-world realistic way of understanding core traditional insights or biblical insights, such as The Fall of Adam and Eve, or theological insights like, Original Sin. It also helps me understand my own behavior and my own actions in the world.

Connie and I have been watching this great [Teaching Company](#) course called [Understanding the Brain](#) by [Jeanette Norden](#). She teaches at [Vanderbilt School of Medicine](#). And it's an absolutely fabulous course on the brain. Part of what she's saying is exactly what you're just saying about the plasticity of the brain and its ability to rewire and to adapt to even major things, such as strokes.

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 13.7 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.

Host: I remember [Sallie McFague](#) was a pretty significant influence on my thinking in the late '80s and early '90s—especially in her book, *The Body of God*. She asks, “What is our core metaphor?” Jesus used the metaphor of *the kingdom of God*. But we don't live in a world of kings and kingdoms and serfs. That's not the political reality that any of us experience. She asks: What would be a metaphor, a core metaphor, that would strike us in a way similar to how people living two or three thousand years ago were struck with the metaphor of the kingdom of God?

She offers us one possibility: the world as God's body, *the universe as God's body*. 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.

But I've had those thoughts before. The new stuff came to me 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.

I wanted to see what you thought of this—part of regaining the mind of a child might be shifting our thinking about faith to move it more in the direction of *trust* in life, without interpretation—just direct experience. Of course, we can't *not* interpret. I get that. But to whatever degree that we can move into noticing life as it is, noticing reality and having a heart

of love, a heart of trust, and a heart of gratitude—the fundamental feelings of love, trust, and gratitude—to whatever degree we can do that, we do regain that heart of a child. And in those moments—those times can last for days or weeks or months—we can be living in “the kingdom of God.” I wanted to throw that out and see if that makes any sense. What do you think of it?

Ilia: I’m a historical theologian by training, so I do look at things by way of history—because I think it is helpful to us. What you pointed out is very good—moving from trust to belief. A lot of what has happened within Western Christianity and Western culture on the whole is what we can call a separation of the mind and body, of the soul and spirit and matter. Many people point to [Descartes](#) and the philosophy of [Cartesian dualism](#), which took place in the 16th century in the period of [the Enlightenment](#). If you look between the [Middle Ages](#) and the Enlightenment, something came apart. And I myself have thought about the rise of Scholasticism: in other words, the objectification of knowledge. Up to [Scholasticism](#), knowledge was largely experiential. For the theologian, one came to know God by experiencing God in prayer and scripture. The scientist was, in a sense, the observer of the heavens. Aristotle himself, as a biologist, was very experiential about life. The idea of experiential knowledge we can trace up to the Middle Ages.

And then 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 gonna 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.

Even knowledge itself becomes stifled. The whole knowing process breaks down under a set of do’s and don’ts of beliefs. Knowledge itself by its nature is explorative. The knower always is seeking to know more. The child doesn’t pick up a leaf and say, “Oh, this is a leaf with five points and so many veins and structures.” *[laughter]* They want to know more; they want to go out and they want to experience more of that tree and the branch. The whole sense

of the knowing process of a child is explorative, and it is unending and just filled with delight. But when you move from the trusting in the *experience* of knowing to the set of *beliefs*, the whole knowing process just stops. It's no longer real knowledge. It's only information: "Here's what I need to do so that I'm gonna be okay." That is when I think knowledge breaks down.

Host: Wow! What an indictment of much of what gets called education, too!

Ilia: Exactly!

Host: Education is, then, this idea that we're only giving basic information and pouring information into the minds of young people, rather than enlisting their curiosity and their fascination—and their trust and their awe.

Ilia: 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.

Host: What also got separated out was understanding spirituality as an end in itself, rather than a spirituality as the means to be in right relationship with God, with reality. 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](#).

Ilia: The spirit is not a floating thing. It's the energy of matter, the spirit and the body—it's an All-Oneness. Each different person is spiritualized matter in a dynamic movement towards becoming something. So, 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.

Just to raise a point about technology: 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.

Host: I completely agree. This is one of the things that I wanted you to share more about—this interface of technology and [transhumanism](#). One of the things that's been a fascination for me is exactly that: the human relationship toward technology and to the natural world. Does our technology lead us in a more intimate relationship with the natural world—or not? And there are trends in both directions. That's both an exciting and a troubling thing.

Two of the best books that I've ever read on this subject include [Joël de Rosnay's](#) 2,000 book called [The Symbiotic Man](#). Unfortunately, it should have been titled *The Symbiotic Human*, but it was translated from the French as *The Symbiotic Man*. It had this god-awful cover of all these white men standing in this attention pose and it just didn't sell well here in the USA, even though it was an international bestseller. The other book is [Kevin Kelly's](#) [What Technology Wants](#). I found both to be fascinating contributions to this whole question.

So, please, say more about transhumanism and technology and human evolution. I want to also make time for you to share about where Jesus is in all this—how you understand Jesus and the meaning of Jesus in an evolutionary context. But first, anything you have to say on the technology part.

Ilia: [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.

When you look at the history of technology, it was really known as a domestic science, and the purpose of technology was to free the spirit or to enable the human person to be more oriented toward God. In a monastery like the Benedictine Monastery, where a lot of technology developed, the idea was to make work a little bit more efficient so that we can be more attuned to God. In the Middle Ages after [the Black Plague](#) there was a rise in technology—especially alchemy—[an emphasis on] any technology that would prepare one for [the Second Coming of Christ](#). After the 13th century there was a millenarianism, an expectation that Christ was coming

anytime soon. Technology has always played into the ideas of the perfection of life. In other words, wellbeing or perfected-being in the Middle Ages was to be ready for the Second Coming of Christ—and you would want to use alchemy to enhance one’s preparedness.

I’m particularly interested in information technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, and biomedical technology. From the beginning, these technologies (including the rise of computers in the 1950s) speak to our desire not just to conquer the enemy or to break the codes (which is [Alan Turing](#)’s work in the 1950s) but to meet several needs within humanity. One is, of course, the question of efficiency. We like things done efficiently—this is Western pragmatism. And the computer enables us to do. But more recently—when you look at pharmaceuticals—in some ways it’s so subtle I don’t know if we’re really attentive to it—but if you look at the commercials they will tell you that pharmaceuticals will help you live longer, live more gracefully, and enhance being. You can see why technocrats say that technology is the way of fulfilling what religion promises. Where Christianity promises immortality, salvation and overcoming death, technology is saying, “We’ll be able to fulfill the very things you seek.” The whole idea of living longer, living better lives is now part of technology’s dream.

Host: What scares me about that perspective is that it is without an understanding of the vitality and the necessity of death at all levels of the cosmos—from the death of stars, to the death of molecules, to the death of species, on and on. This is one of Connie’s, my wife’s, big programs—which is about seeing death with *deep-time* eyes. Without [a deep-time appreciation of death](#), it is hard to understand that, for example, in a finite world, if you want a world of children, you have to have the death of elders. If all you’ve got is birth in a finite world without death, very quickly you are wall-to-wall with people. In the next 500 years, there’s not going to be more than a small fraction of one percent of humanity that’s going to leave the planet for anywhere else. So we’re going to have to have a moratorium on birth if we all start living forever or living a very long time.

Ilia: Absolutely. In my view, the culture has marginalized death, and technology wants to annihilate death. We miss the fact that death is integral to life—that without death, there is no new life. That is the whole evolutionary upslope so to speak. Eliminating death is one of [Ray Kurzweil](#)’s dreams: that we’ll be able to download this human brain into a chip and re-plant it into new hardware, as if the body is only a casing to be replaced with a another new casing when the old falls apart. But we know that life is more than the brain, and the brain is more than just something that can be planted into a chip. Then you lose something about the vitality of life. There is something happening to us—to the human brain—especially in young people today. I always quip that young people look like us but their brains are really wired differently.

Host: Yes, it’s true.

Ilia: I do think that constant interaction with technology is causing brain changes. I’m not the only one saying that—there are studies done showing this. Young people, for example, are very

relational in terms of all the social networking, with [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#) and all. But when it comes to a face-to-face interaction, there's a real hesitancy—if not lag—there.

When you talk about technology and ecology, you have two competing forces. Technology, on one hand, is pulling us into a connectivity that's global and social, and yet it's virtual. In other words, the connectivity has a medium to it. It's a type of ecology, a virtual ecology, but it lacks organismity. Organismity requires not only death. An organic relationship requires responsibility, different levels of sacrifice, and different levels of response if the relationship is going to be viable. Relationships through technology have no responsibility to them. In other words, they are all at our control and our disposal.

On one hand, technology is leading to a much more enhanced type of individualism and greater privatization. But in the end, it's not going to be helpful. We need a greater consciousness of our *use* of technology. On some levels, technology is very helpful for solving some of our problems; for example, having enough food or energy. But when it comes to human interaction and human-Earth interaction, we need to think about what we're doing and we need to return to our levels of organic relationship that are biological, without interface: non-interfaced relationships. Whether we return to organic, non-interfaced relationships I do think will determine what new turn evolution is going to take.

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.

Host: I'm finding here in this conversation that I can easily talk to you for a couple more hours, and yet I want to honor the time constraints that we have in this conversation series. But before I do, I really want you to share a bit about one thing. We've gotten feedback from a number of people who say that they're really finding this series incredible and stimulating and intellectually rich. But for people who think about Jesus as having been largely otherworldly—coming from the heavens here to Earth, teaching and preaching and working miracles, and then being resurrected and flying back to the heavens to be with God—those people will ask *where Jesus is* in all this evolutionary stuff. You have some really profound things to say about that. I'd love for you to usher us out on this theme.

Ilia: First, 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.

Host: Wow! Do I envy your students! *[laughter]* Oh, amen! I can't even begin to tell you how much what you just shared resonates. I've never thought of a way to "evolutionize" the concept of salvation in quite the way that you just articulated—in terms of the healing and of being "wholeness makers," and that we bring a commitment to and an embodiment and an incarnation of healing and wholeness and reconciliation and, what I call, [right relationship to reality—right relationship to God—which is the essence of spirituality](#).

Ilia: That's it!

Host: Wow! Thank you, Ilia Delio! Thank you so much for everything that you've shared—the way you've lit up my soul in this conversation and for inviting us to a deeper, more intimate relationship with God in and through this divine, evolutionary, cosmic process. Thank you for sharing everything you have with our listeners today, here on the leading edge of faith.

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