

Diarmuid O’Murchu

“Meeting God in Our Evolutionary Story”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 24 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, [Diarmuid O’Murchu](#) is our featured guest. [Diarmuid](#) is an evolutionary theologian, a member of the [Sacred Heart Missionary Order](#) and a social worker living in [Dublin](#). He’s one of the most effective and beloved popularizers of the [Great Story](#), or [Epic of Evolution](#), especially in Roman Catholic circles. He has a real gift more making complex ideas both understandable and practical. He’s written [a number of acclaimed books](#), including [Quantum Theology](#), [Evolutionary Faith: Rediscovering God in Our Great Story](#), and [Ancestral Grace: Meeting God in Our Human Story](#). Here we talk about “Meeting God in Our Evolutionary Story.”

Host: Hello Diarmuid O’Murchu, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Diarmuid: My pleasure! Good to be with you.

Host: Good to be with you, too. So Diarmuid, could you please share with our listeners a little of your own story—your own faith journey. How you got to where you are and the role that you see yourself playing in this larger movement?

Diarmuid: My background is quite traditional [Roman Catholic](#). I was born and reared in [Ireland](#). An event in the early 1960s called [Vatican II](#) tried to revamp or reform the Catholic Church. I was in training for the ministry about ten years later when the reforms of Vatican II started reaching Ireland. At that time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a tremendous amount of psychological and spiritual turmoil going, within the religious orders. And I belonged to one, called [Sacred Heart Missionaries](#).

As part of my own personal search at that time, I started reading the works of the great [Teilhard de Chardin](#), the [Jesuit](#) priest and [paleontologist](#). That is where my story begins in

terms of my interest in the material that we share together [[evolutionary Christianity](#)]. My background educationally is quite traditional: the classics, Latin, Greek, and so forth. Unfortunately, the limited education in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s meant that I did no science whatsoever. But I had the good fortune in the early 1980s to be a school chaplain in Ireland in a rather progressive second-level school, where I got into conversation with some of the science teachers—one of whom was also very interested in, what at the time we were calling, “the new physics.” And that’s when I began making the connections with science—forming the bigger links with Teilhard de Chardin.

Meanwhile, I had done a degree in social science in [Trinity College](#) in Dublin in Ireland, and part of that was only an elective: anthropology. I became totally fascinated by our big, ancient human story. In a sense, I was putting three things together: [theology](#) (which really became more “spirituality”), [anthropology](#), and the [new physics](#). This led me eventually in the 1990s to write (what has become my seminal work) [Quantum Theology](#). Some people think, before they read the book, that it’s about the interface of science and theology. But it’s not really about that. It’s more about that if we take more seriously the bigger worldview of quantum physics: What would theology look like in the light of that. And I’m suggesting, of course, that we would have to change drastically from the Greek metaphysical and rather rational approach to theology and spirituality to one encapsulating these big questions—because I often say to audiences, God is in the big questions and God was there for billions of years before religions or churches ever started defining or theologizing about God. This has become my main focus.

I belong to a missionary religious congregation, and a lot of my work is working in a missionary capacity—not at a permanent location, but in leading renewal programs in Asia and Africa. Although I have done a lot of work in the United States, Canada, and Europe, my primary interest is trying to spread this news in Africa and in Asia, where resources are still very limited and where people simply don’t have the money to buy books or buy videos or things like that. So that is now my primary target. I go to the Philippines every year. I try to visit an African country every year, while still keeping some links with Europe and the rest of the West. So that’s an abbreviated version of my story up to now.

Host: That’s great! Could you share a little bit more about how an evolutionary understanding of this deep-time perspective—a science-based understanding of our [“big history,” our cosmic history](#)—how that has enriched or strengthened or expanded or deepened (or in some way shifted) your own views and experience of God and your own views and experience of our religious tradition?

Diarmuid: Yes. For me that’s an ongoing piece of work. I was reading [something](#) recently by [Stuart Kauffman](#) where he tries to put forward this idea that perhaps our Christian approach—which is in some of the other religions too, but very strong in the Christian approach—of trying to personalize God, in order to highlight the intimacy of the relationship between us and God, may in fact have damaged our appreciation and understanding of the grandeur of God (which many of the mystics are more in touch with), and in turn has obviously damaged our own

spiritual potential.

So, for instance, one of the things I'm still trying to rework is how to embrace and include the personal within this big cosmic view of God, as looked at from the cosmology. But also for me, particularly given my anthropology background, is looking at the story of the big God who is at work in our seven million year story as a human species, which is now the official date adopted by paleontologists. And one of my most recent books, [Ancestral Grace](#), is all about that subject. So, how to honor something of that more dynamic, creative, empowering, understanding of the Holy One, of the Great Mystery, while at the same time embracing some of this more personal understanding.

Now for me, my way of trying to re-work all that is the other hat I wear: my psychology background. So I draw on [Jungian psychology](#), which talks a lot about the [transpersonal](#). For Jung, the transpersonal is not about transcending the personal and merely moving beyond the personal. It's about the re-discovery of our true personhood within the context of the natural world in which we're situated. To put that simply, if I or you are not living in a healthy surrounding environment, then we won't be healthy in the full holistic sense within our bodies, within our personalities—and we won't be able to realize our full God-given potential. So for me the word 'transpersonal' embraces the deeply personal as well as embraces the evolutionary context of Creation and of our long human story as part of our entire makeup as creatures of God.

Host: Yes. In fact, it reminds me of something that Connie's been sharing a lot lately, which is that the contexts that we put ourselves in—the environment in which we put ourselves . . . I mean, if we know anything about evolution, it's we adapt to our environment. And in some ways, our environment helps to create who we show up as, who we emerge as in that particular context.

It's one of the reasons why any of us who've been in intimate relationships know that who we are in that relationship may be very different from who we've shown up as in another relationship—because the context, the environment is different. And that too is a form of free choice. What choices do we make in terms of what environments we put ourselves in, knowing that that environment will call forth a part of ourselves, an aspect of ourselves that perhaps we didn't even know before?

Diarmuid: Yes, and you know this as well as I do (although maybe we work with slightly different audiences) that when people encounter the New Story [[the Epic of Evolution](#)] in the initial stages, this is one of the things they struggle with: How to reconcile it with their Christian faith. But if their Christian faith has been largely determined by the context or environment of the Greek metaphysical scholastic background, which is often what it is (at least in the Catholic Church), then that is too narrow a context for them to be able to really build bridges with the bigger and larger worldview.

The famous [Stephen Hawking](#) put that brilliantly in one of his very well known interviews that he gave in 1981, in which the interviewer asked him outright, "You're talking about these

wonderful, spiritually inspiring understandings of Creation.” And then she said to him directly, “Why can’t you believe in God?” The answer he gave her, of course, was: “Your God is too small for me.” That was the answer he gave. And that’s exactly the kind of clash, or the tension, that I think is often arising, particularly by people of more fundamentalist or sometimes evangelical backgrounds who feel that the images and understandings of God we have been given are sacrosanct and we mustn’t tamper with them. But we are growing into the realization that they were often given to us by ordinary fragile human beings, like ourselves. And it’s a perfectly legitimate thing to explore them in larger context—which is, of course, what many of the great mystics have always been inviting us to do.

Host: Yes. Diarmuid, I’d love for you to share a little bit more about how you offer this good news, this epic of evolution way of thinking about the gospel: the way of thinking about what our faith tradition offers for people. When you speak with people in the [Third World](#), when you speak with people who are not like most British or Americans or Canadians, how do you share the story? What is it that you focus on, in terms of the good news? How do you help them see this in a larger context?

Diarmuid: This is the subject of my next book and it’s something that I have been working on for a number of years. Up until about 1950—ever since the time of [Constantine](#), a time span of almost seventeen hundred years—the idea of the “kingship” of Jesus has been central to Christian faith around the world. It had a huge influence on the hymns we use, the prayers we use, how often we referred to Jesus as the King, and how often we attribute king-like qualities to him.

Since the 1950s, scripture scholars have been revisiting that phrase “[Kingdom of God](#)” in the Gospels and increasingly realizing that Jesus was using that phrase probably in a very subversive way—challenging the whole power structure of kingship, which, of course, in his own historical time, was a major element of the worldview through which people read reality. That’s often where my workshops begin with these audiences: trying to get a better understanding, thanks to a lot of very good scholarship these days, What was the worldview that Jesus operated out of? How did he address that worldview and how did he challenge it? Because challenge it, I believe he did.

Now, to skip a number of points that I usually make first, I put it to audiences: “Can we discern or at least get some sense of what was the worldview that Jesus was operating out of when he used the phrase “the Kingdom of God”? It seems from the Gospels, that was a phrase which was frequently on his lips, which he never defines in a rational, logical way. When the disciples ask him what does it mean, he answers in parables—which, of course, are themselves highly subversive stories. So I think that by going through this route we can begin to understand and then ask directly the question: *What was the worldview that Jesus was operating out of?* It seems to me that that worldview was remarkably close to the worldview that we’re now rediscovering through the “[New Story](#)” and through the new cosmology.

That’s where I think then there was a huge clash between the historical Jesus and many

people in his time who were operating more out of the three-tier, reductionistic, linear kind of worldview. All this has been enhanced wonderfully in the past thirty years because people are revisiting what they call the [Aramaic Jesus](#): the Jesus who spoke in Aramaic, which was definitely his primarily language—nobody doubts that. But since it was only a spoken language, there’s obviously a lot of work to be done on how do we access it, how do we interpret it, and so forth.

One very bold suggestion made by an American scholar, [John Dominic Crossan](#), (and this is central to my next book) is that if we look at the Aramaic and try to honor Jesus speaking in Aramaic, and try to hear the nuances of the Aramaic, the English words “Kingdom of God” (which are a translation from Greek) are probably grossly dishonoring what Jesus would have said in Aramaic and what he would have conveyed and how he would have been heard.

In all probability, what he would have conveyed and how he would have been heard would be better expressed in the words “the companionship of empowerment.” That’s what he was really on to. He was totally challenging patriarchal and linear power. Instead he was talking about companionships empowering. He wasn’t even interested in a benign way of hierarchical power. He wanted power mediated through companionships. And for me, there’s a powerful connection between that and the relationality that I see as central to the New Story and the new cosmology.

I mean, if you listen to [Brian Swimme](#) (video [here](#), print interview [here](#)), or the late [Thomas Berry](#) (audio [here](#)), or any similarly minded people, the phrase they used over and over again is that the new cosmology is about [a new way of relating](#), about expanding the horizons of our relationships. It seems to me that that’s exactly what the historical Jesus was doing. And with that lens, the Gospels just explode into a whole new set of meanings.

So that’s the approach I use. Interestingly, it takes Africans and the Asians awhile to buy into it and to resonate with it, because it’s all new to them.

Host: Yes, sure. I’m noticing some emotional excitement on my end because I just hadn’t thought about it quite in that way. This is a new concept, a new way of thinking, for me—even though I’ve been immersed in this relational cosmos, this understanding of reality that sees relationship at the heart.

Diarmuid: Behind that phrase “Kingdom of God,” when you get the Aramaic ... I can share here with you, with the listeners, if they want help, my webpage is <http://www.Diarmuid13.com>. And there’s [a section in there on prayers](#). And if you go into that section on prayers, you will see what the “Our Father” looks like when we translate it from the Aramaic rather than from the Greek. And it really gives you a great insight into what the Aramaic language must have been like and the nuances of meaning that would have conveyed in it—which would have been very different from our common translations of the Gospels, which are taken from the Greek. Of course, this will be hugely important work for hermeneutics and Gospel studies for years to come. At the moment, I’m interested in making links with the New Story and also with our own great human evolutionary story as a species.

Host: Yes. . . If you could say just what it is about [this big picture](#), this [universe story](#) told in a sacred, a meaningful, and inspiring way. What is it about that story that inspires you? Where do you find that it fills you with gratitude or trust or inspiration?

Diarmuid: I guess for me—and obviously we’re all influenced by our backgrounds—for me it’s a rediscovery, it’s a reconnection with my childhood upbringing on a farm in Ireland, in a relatively poor family where we grew all our own food. We killed a pig every year, which was the meat the family would eat. Even though my dad didn’t speak in terms of the sacredness of the land as a modern person might, he obviously had a very clear sense of how sacred it was. I was immersed in that as a child: elements of what people call [Celtic spirituality](#), given my background. It is about realizing the power, the awakening, the relationship of God in and through nature. Therefore, when I began reading [Teilhard de Chardin](#), there was an immediate kind of resonance. It was a resonance coming from within. It wasn’t just an intellectual resonance. It was much deeper than that. When I began reading the works of [Thomas Berry](#) and became more aware of the current research and study, the resonances deepened. What was happening was not merely a confirmation of what I had grown up with and knowing more intimately without having a language or a vocabulary to articulate it; it was something of my own deeper dreams of who I am and who I’m destined to become. I was growing and developing, through that, in ways that I was only able to name several years later.

Host: Say more about that.

Diarmuid: One important part of it would be that in my traditional Christian upbringing, the dualisms played a huge role in terms of my understandings, in my articulation, my prayers, my language, and so forth—dualisms such as earth versus heaven, body versus soul, matter versus spirit. When I began reading Teilhard, I think that for me was the beginning of my realizing the terrible split that was within myself, and of beginning to heal that split and build bridges over it. In other words, for me, growing into a deeper sense of the sacred—and ideally this has to be for everybody—is through the natural world, and not through a dualistic separation from it.

Host: I remember Thomas Berry sharing with me back in the early ‘90s that he felt that Teilhard de Chardin was the most significant Christian theologian since the Apostle Paul.

Diarmuid: I would be inclined to agree with that...Yes...Yes! Now mind you, there are some others hidden away in history. I marvel, for example, at [Hildegard of Bingen](#) and all those people in the early half of the Middle Ages, or coming up to the Middle Ages: there was an incredible, mystical, Creation-based spirituality in many parts of Europe, with a lot of outstanding women, particularly, but also some men, like [Meister Eckhart](#). They were also light-years ahead of their time and were Teilhards in their own right, if you see what I mean.

Host: Yes. One of the most common comments that we get was reflected just recently in a program that I did, where—and I’ve actually probably heard this more than a hundred times over the last nine years—a woman came up to me and she said, “You know, I never realized until your presentation that [evolution—cosmic evolution, the evolution of everyone and everything—is my creation story](#).” It just never occurred to her that this science-based story could be a deeply emotionally fulfilling creation myth.

Diarmuid: Yes, and that’s the awful tragedy. I run into a fair bit of that in Africa and in Asia. I think to some extent maybe you’re reworking it a bit more quickly in the United States. But as recent as just a month ago, I had people in an audience in the Philippines and basically their question was: “Isn’t that word ‘evolution’ totally against God, no matter how you try to put it positively?” They didn’t put the question as bluntly as that, but that’s what they were trying to say. It’s sad that that word carries so much negative baggage for people—and which, unfortunately, I think in a strong Catholic country like the Philippines is because they’ve heard that preached several times.

Host: Yes. Well, you know, when I ask you a question in terms of your vision for the Church: as you imagine the Church evolving, like everything in the universe evolves and adapts and transforms through time, how do you see the Church evolving? As you imagine worship, as you imagine liturgy, as you imagine what we even think of when we use the word ‘scripture’ in the decades or perhaps centuries to come, how do you see the Church evolving?

Diarmuid: One central element for me (which indeed was there already in the time of [Paul](#) in his strategy in early Christian times) is the reclaiming and returning to basic small Christian communities. Again, we’re back to the relationship principle, where people are able to relate to each other in greater mutuality and in a way that really respects adult wisdom and adult insight. There would be forums where people can tell their story and have their story honored. There they would have adult conversations where they can explore things together and show that wisdom rising up from the base of their lives, rather than coming down from the top. At least it seems to me one significant way, maybe the primary significant way, for the re-creation or the re-invention of the Church.

It’s very interesting historically from the Catholic perspective, and indeed this would be true of some of the other Christian denominations too. In the 1970s and the 1980s, there was a flourishing of basic Christian communities in parts of Central and South America. In Brazil, which is a huge Christian country (predominantly Catholic), a lot of the material that was gathered and written about it came all to Brazil. But a very interesting thing about Brazil from the documentation, the basic Christian community movement in Brazil in the ‘70s and ‘80s, at least in the Catholic context, only reached about ten percent of the people. Ninety percent remained very conventional and traditional. Yet that ten percent was so authentic. It sent vibrations across the entire Catholic World. Many many people, including church leaders,

began to say, “This is the Church that Jesus intended—no doubt about it.”

So I see that basic Christian community model—in other words, we will still need some institutional dimensions. But, as with the dream of the United Nations, for me the institutional dimension—probably the more successful one—would be the networking of the small networks, rather than any kind of a re-creation of a pyramid from the top down. People say, “What would you like the next pope to be?” Quite frankly, I don’t think the next pope is going to make the slightest difference, no matter how radical or progressive he would be. For us Catholics, I think we’re going past that point. What a lot of people don’t realize is that eighty percent of the Catholic population of the world now lives in the Southern Hemisphere. Only twenty percent live in the north.

Whereas, if you go back to 1960, about sixty percent were in the north. There has been a massive swing in the past fifty years. And so, you know, what comes out of Rome is not going to be that significant anymore. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit of God is re-creating the Church already: the Church of the South. Now again, many of them are very conventional and traditional, but I think that’s part of the transition—which will take awhile to work out. But if the [Holy Spirit](#) is behind this movement—which I believe the Holy Spirit is—then I think in due course that’s where the change will come from. It’s not likely to come from the north, in my opinion.

Host: That’s really interesting! I’m curious, where do you see some of the fault lines? Where do you see some of the fissures, or at least some of the places where something new is emerging: a new way of thinking about the Church, a new way of thinking about the Christian faith, or perhaps a new way of *being*?

You mentioned certainly the small groups: I think that’s quite accurate in my experience. And even some of the large megachurches around the world: they succeed to the degree that they have cell groups—to the degree that seven to fifteen people can meet every Wednesday night or every Friday night, and that’s where they are able to be authentic and transparent and get the pastoral support and care, where you really get the peer group support and accountability and nurturing that can only happen in a small group. The fellowship and worship that happens at that scale: it’s very different from that which happens in a large congregation or even in a medium-size congregation.

So I agree with you fully that that’s something that is emerging that’s very exciting. But I’m wondering if you have any thoughts about any of the other sort of fault lines or things that may be emerging now that weren’t part of our tradition—at least not in a fully expressed form in the past.

Diarmuid: Another corollary to that basic Christian community model is what I would see as a second major development, and that is: more and more people wanting to reclaim or re-appropriate a sense of being adult in their faith and a desire to be treated as adults—not as children.

One has to remember that a basic Christian community is like any group. There would be

dynamics going on within, and the group will need to have some familiarity around those dynamics. If there's a tendency to treat people as children, with some people trying to claim the power for themselves, that is very quickly going to destroy the group. If the basic Christian community is to be the flourishing group and the empowering kind of group (which ideally it should and which I think Jesus would want it to be), more and more people will need to be more adult with each other in how they handle that group and how they handle what's going on within the group.

And so, some of the language we use in our theology and in our spirituality—Father God, Mother Church, children of the Church, or children of God—all that kind of language I would like to see it changing into the realization that Jesus was calling forth people, even in his own day, primarily to be more adult. That means, following an adult Jesus, worshipping an adult God—with that very strong emphasis on the word 'adult'. Even in places like Asia and Africa, I'm hearing echoes of people wanting to be treated that way, wanting an articulation and expression of their faith that honors that reality, and wanting new structures and systems through which it can be incorporated and further advanced. So I see that as a second major strand of development.

Host: It seems to me, Diarmuid, that we as a species, [humanity as a whole, is in a maturing process](#)—in a growing-up process that's not at all unlike what we've all gone through in the process of going from children through adolescence to adulthood. And I'm thinking about it specifically in two ways. I think it could be said—certainly metaphorically, but I think it's accurate—that [we're in a rite of passage](#). We're in an ordeal right now. We're moving from our childhood as a species, where we were primarily guided by beliefs. I mean, children of all traditions, of all cultures, are guided primarily by beliefs. Children are sponges for beliefs; they will believe anything that their trusted elders will tell them. And of course, there are good evolutionary reasons for that. And so we soak up the beliefs that are given to us, and then those beliefs guide our lives.

Then as teenagers, we begin to question some of those beliefs. We start asking ourselves, "Does this map onto my own experience? Does it actually make sense of and jibe with the experience of others, including others outside my in-group?" And so, then as healthy adults, we're guided not just by what was taught to us or told to us was the truth, but we're guided by evidence. We're guided by experience. And we're guided by the experience of others who are perhaps very different from us.

And I think [our species is going through that same process](#). For 99% of human history, all cultures were guided by beliefs. I mean, it couldn't have been any other way. We didn't have empirical evidence for how the ocean came to be, or the mountains, or what the sun is made of, or where we came from—not in any kind of measurable sense. So we had mythic beliefs that humans have always had, in different parts of the world, that have given access to certain feeling states and that guided people as a culture.

And now, we finally have in many ways (not totally, by any stretch)—but we now have more and more evidence. We have more and more knowledge that can guide us. And so the

question then becomes: How can we *interpret* the facts? How could we *interpret* the evidence? How can we tell stories that are grand and mythic—that support us in cooperating across ethnic and political and religious and other differences, so that we can work together as a species in the service of a healthy future for all of us? And so I see that process of shifting from being guided mostly by beliefs to [being guided by evidence and knowledge](#) and experience, as something that humanity is going through. And it's what we've all gone through in the process of our own maturing.

Diarmuid: Yes. And the implications of all that for our educational systems is enormous—and now I haven't even begun to look at that. The great deal of the information given to youngsters in our school systems: they never use it or it's not particularly relevant or useful for them in their daily lives. In a sense, to pick up what you've just been saying, it doesn't match with their experience. It doesn't help them to make sense of their experience. I think our educational system would have to move more from kind of dispensing knowledge into these 'receptacles' sitting there at desks, to a much more participative approach that's working with our stories, building on that experience, and then incorporating, of course, all the elements of the surrounding culture.

I'm sure you've heard these stories, just as I have, of the youngsters. I think it was in St. Louis: the example I heard about a year ago, where youngsters were able to name fifty brands in the latest fashions, but couldn't name ten trees growing in the local park. That kind of terrible disparity! Earlier on we were talking about environment and context. In other words, their lives have been driven by this horrendous advertising and driven in their values around fashion and so forth. But the whole ecological environmental context of our lives: they're largely unaware of it.

Going back to the point you were making there about the adult: You're probably aware of some of the work of [Elisabet Sahtouris](#). It's from her I got the idea, probably ten or fifteen years ago, that as a species we seem to be going through a kind of a teenage stage, which she describes in her books as "adolescent belligerence"—in other words, all the ways we are reacting in the way we deal with nature and with the natural world. And that there is now an enormous urgency for us to grow up and become young adults who will learn to relate as adults with our world. Hopefully, the breakthrough that happened at Cancun yesterday in the climate change conference: one would like to think that that's the beginning of people becoming a bit more adult around that particular issue.

Host: Yeah, I agree. The second thing that I think we're going through collectively—that we've all gone through personally and individually, those of us who are adults—is that as children the universe seems to center around you. I mean, you're the center of the universe—or so you think. And then even as teenagers, most teenagers still think that they're kind of the center of the world. But as healthy adults, we realize that our legacy (how we will be remembered by history) will be determined by whether we're a contribution to the world or not, whether we're a blessing to the world or not, what difference we make in the lives of others. And I think our

species is going through that shift, as well.

For most of human history, most cultures thought that the world was made for us. And I think what we're now realizing is that *we were made for the world*. That we are here to become—again, thinking mythically—I believe that we're here to become like an immune system, where humanity protects and fosters and defends the health and the wellbeing of the larger body of life, and we do so to the glory of God. That is, we do so with religious devotion—recognizing that it's not possible to praise and worship God in some abstract sense without working for justice, working for sustainability, working for peace: basically, being a blessing to this world in which we find ourselves as an incarnation of grace, as an incarnation of God.

Diarmuid: I agree. And in a sense it's precisely to enhance that view that I wrote my book, [Ancestral Grace](#), which is built around our evolutionary story as a species over seven million years, and predominantly coming out of Africa. When you look at elements of that story in which, thanks to the intense research of the past twenty or thirty years particularly, we're now getting a clearer picture of things, the one thing that's becoming more and more clear is that from much of that story (which has been kind of dismissed by arrogant westerners as a primitive story of people behaving in a barbaric way and in over-enmeshed in Creation and so forth). But in actual fact, our ancestors over several thousands of years were not so much enmeshed in Creation, but they were relating in a more integral and intimate way with it—which in turn enhanced their own development.

And so by revisiting [our Great Story](#)—and I'm talking about [the human story](#) here—we can glean some important insights that can help to return us to exactly the kind of relationships that you have been describing a few minutes ago. In other words, it's not so much something we have to reinvent totally from the new. There are hints, there are guidelines, there are suggestions in our Great Story—particularly when we revisit it with some of the important insights emerging in our time from the study of paleontology, anthropology, and so forth.

Host: Yes, exactly. In fact, one of the things that I would love for you to comment on (I know that you mention it on your own website): you've got one of my favorite quotes from [St. Thomas Aquinas](#). Say a little bit about how St. Thomas viewed this understanding that *if we don't understand Creation correctly, we can't hope to understand God correctly*. Say a little bit more about that.

Diarmuid: Well, there are a number of ways of approaching that statement. It's an amazing statement, and it saddens me that I've never come across a Christian theologian who actually quotes it—certainly not up until recent times. One kind of very simple basic way of approaching it is that in every catechism (the catechism, I suppose, is more a Catholic term for what is a book of questions and answers and is usually posed in a reductionistic way). But even every catechism has the questions, "Who created the world?" and "Who sustains the world?" and answers, "God created the world" and "God is always sustaining the world."

Therefore, if the world in terms of the conventional evolutionary stories has been around

for about 13.7 billion years, then presumably God as the creative energy within and behind it has been fully at work in it for 13.7 billion years. Now to me, that's what revelation is about—God revealing God's Self has been fully at work for 13.7 billion years. That line of Thomas Aquinas, "If we don't understand Creation correctly . . ." Well, it's another way of saying, *If we don't honor and respect the fact that God has been fully at work in Creation over these 13.7 billion years, then how can we hope to understand the God we believe in?*

Now, it also widens and broadens our understanding of God—maybe along the lines of process theology—because, for instance, when we do look at the big story (and Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry deal with this very well in their book, [The Universe Story](#)), we do see times of horrendous destruction, chaos, and so forth. So instead of seeing that as somehow totally alien to God, that is also a part of what I call and they call, "The Great Paradox"—through which God's creativity works.

And it gives us a more complex understanding of God but also a much richer one. It gives us a whole new set of lenses through which we can explore awkward questions—like, suffering, for instance: that there is a certain quality and a quantity of suffering that seems innate to the movements of Creation and is therefore part of God's creativity. So our task as human beings is not to rid the world totally of suffering, but to help us to understand *what* suffering is necessary at times. How do we engage more constructively and creatively with suffering? And how do we learn to befriend it rather than trying to conquer and control it? I think that's where a lot of unnecessary suffering is caused: by our excessive felt need to conquer and control it, as if it's some kind of an object we can bring into the bar of our own reasoning.

It's these examples of the processes at work within Creation that can open us up to a much more dynamic and much more enriched understanding of what we mean by "God."

Host: I'm reminded by what you just said of the fact (and it's a disturbing fact) that so much evil in the world has happened because we've tried to rid the world of evil. I mean, Hitler would be the first example.

Diarmuid: Exactly! Yes, and therefore I suppose it's very much the kind of philosophy of [Alcoholics Anonymous \(AA\)](#) groups: that we need to be much more humble, or reconnect with the humus of the Earth itself and with the earthiness of our existence. And by learning to befriend these kind of processes (which is very much what process theology says), not merely do we come up with a different understanding of God; we come up with a radically different understanding of our own role as co-creators rather than manipulators.

Host: Yes, exactly! ... So **Diarmuid**, if you could take just a few minutes and share with our listeners the essence of each of your significant books—because you've really written some powerful stuff in this field. You mentioned a little bit about [Ancestral Grace](#). Could you say more about that book? Then just talk briefly about your other books, as well.

Diarmuid: Well, let me begin by talking about [Ancestral Grace](#), which is one of my more recent books. I think particularly for a Christian audience, that is quite significant. The first part of that book is retracing our story as a species coming out of Africa. A lot of the information in there is easily accessible today through a whole range of web pages and books, thanks to some of the great work that has been done by a group of scholars called paleontologists.

It's becoming an intriguing, fascinating story. For example, just one glimpse into it, which has a lot to do with our spiritual background: Up to about ten years ago, we looked at our artistic history going back to about forty thousand years BCE, with the so-called "Ice Age" art. Then they made some new discoveries in the [Blombos Caves](#) in southern Africa. Those discoveries pushed [the beginning of artistic expression back] to about seventy or eighty thousand years ago. And then as recent as 2008, they made this major discovery at [Pinnacle Point](#) along the southern coast of Africa. So dating of our artistic history has gone back to 160,000 years ago.

In other words, the more we're getting into this material, we're not finding evidence of a fundamentally flawed species, with our "original sin" controlling the whole landscape. We are meeting ancestors with a creativity that is deeply sacred and profound. And so the split between science and spirituality doesn't make any sense at all as we begin to revisit this material.

So, that's the first part of the book. The second part of the book for a Christian readership is probably the single most challenging. I'm revisiting the word "Incarnation"—which is a word we use a lot, of course, coming up to the Christmas season. In conventional Christian theology, we understand *Incarnation* as God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus. But it seems to me (and it goes back to what I said a few minutes ago about the Catechism), if God is fully at work in Creation at every stage, then our God was fully there with us as a species when we first evolved seven million years ago (which is the current scientific date that the scholars now accept).

Then *Incarnation*, it seems to me, would need to be redefined, because that's where it begins. If you like, God is saying, in the words of St Paul, saying, a total "yes" to what's happening in this new group of creatures called humans seven million years ago. That being the case, then, we have to revisit our Christian story. I don't see a major challenge in this, but it obviously would be challenging for people hearing it for the first time. That we need to reconceptualize or rethink the historical Jesus as an affirmation, a celebration, and a fulfillment of everything we achieved over those seven million years.

Therefore, God in Jesus is not a divine rescue for a species that has been getting it drastically wrong. It's more about an affirmation, a confirmation, and a celebration of a story, of a process where we got it right most of the time. Now, we didn't get it perfect, and we never do. And so, there's a whole rethinking, then, that would have to be done of our Christian story along those lines. And that is maybe the more evolutionary part of that book, which is Part II of the book.

Then in Part III, I look forward to some of the future developments: How will the human evolve over the next decades or centuries—which of course is open to a lot of different ideas.

For instance, how the whole information context is changing our way of seeing reality and perceiving reality and even some of the workings in our own brains.

After [Quantum Theology](#), I would consider [*Ancestral Grace*] as my second most important book, because I also think it's very helpful for people in the United States. A lot of people are enamored by the New Story and the cosmic story and a lot of the material we have on that. But I do see a great need for it to be supplemented by a *human* story that acknowledges the same breadth and depth and scope. That's why I hope that book would be helpful.

My other writings are either around the religious life itself, the monastic religious life. That's important for me because I'm part of it—and, again, I'm trying to revamp it into a larger picture and a larger context. I've also written a number of books on spirituality, trying to highlight the fact that spirituality is much bigger, larger, and has a longer history than religion—and that if we are to reclaim religions, we need to do so in the context of spirituality.

The last book I wrote is called [An Adult Faith: Growing in Wisdom and Understanding](#), which is very much about the development of the adults that we referred to earlier in this interview. And I'm hoping my next book will be on this new renaming of the "Kingdom of God," probably with the title of *Speaking Truth to Power*—that's probably going to be the title. And that's going to be published by Crossroads. So, that's the broad view of my writings.

Host: And your website again?

Diarmuid: <http://www.Diarmuid13.com>.

Host: I have to ask you one other question, Diarmuid, and it relates to really what so much of this teleseries is about, which is: How would you speak to a young person who is wrestling with how to hold onto a devout Christian faith and also this evolutionary story, this incredible story that's given by science, all the different scientific and historical disciplines?

A lot of young people are wrestling with that because they're being told, on the one hand, that evolution is of the devil and that all the evils of the world could be attributed to Darwin. Yet, clearly, there's a mountain of evidence: the evidence for evolution is just completely overwhelming. And yet for the average person, there's not a lot of bridge-building going on. I mean, of course, all of us in the series, that's part of what we're doing: we are bridge-building. So how would you support a young person who is wrestling with this: how to hold the two together in a mutually enhancing way?

Diarmuid: Well, you know, Michael, one of the reasons why I feel my book [An Adult Faith](#) is so important, believe it or not, is my sense that it's not so much the young people we should be preoccupied about. It's the adult population we need to reach. If young people are being alienated and are picking up these misleading ideas, it's because adults are passing those ideas on to them.

It worries me the amount of money and resources we put into the education of youth, with little or nothing going into creating resources whereby we can educate more adults into these

bigger and deeper ways of seeing things. So that would be a first response to your question, which I know is kind of an indirect response.

Now if I were to meet a young person who were to throw all these kinds of slogans at me, so to speak, I think I would use my basic skills that I learned in the counseling world. I would want to enter into their personal stories and hear...well, I suppose number one, what are they so frightened of? They can speak very vociferously—almost with a sense of indignation, at times—about these ideas. So I want to try to get in touch with, what are they so frightened about? Then, try and get some sense what are their hopes and dreams for their own futures. And then try maybe to help them to realize that they can only alleviate their fears and build their dreams by being more meaningfully connected with the Creation of which they are a part—of which we're all a part.

Now, the better way to do it would be to do it through a conversation, or through some kind of storytelling. I don't know how easy it would be to do that in a classroom. Perhaps one could do it with the aid of some visuals, or indeed in the limited time in a church if one is giving a homily or something. And so I think I would want to go for whether it is youth clubs or other places where young people congregate and try and get through to the person and have a conversation. That would be the medium I would try to use.

Host: Yes. Well, that's great! It's pretty much the only thing I found effective when I've been in that kind of situation myself.

Diarmuid: Yes—particularly if people feel they are being preached *at*, or even preached *to*. Whereas if one, somehow in the more conversational mode, touches into their experience and tries to help them to articulate it in a way that would be helpful to themselves: I think that's where the deeper connections are made.

Host: Yes, I agree. One of the things that I've been thinking about a lot, in terms of my own ways of holding all of this, is language like, "evolutionary faith," like, "[evolutionary spirituality](#)." What do those terms point to? The way I've been thinking about it that homes in on my own experience (and what I found works best when I communicate with others) is the language of "coming into right relationship to reality." [What does it mean to thrive in right relationship to reality](#), so that our relationships thrive—basically, all the people that we have to interact with—and then also, our relationship to our own bioregion, our relationship to the planet, our relationship to God—however we might think of or imagine God, or the analogies and metaphors that we find particularly inspiring and meaningful to us. So I'm wondering if you could say just a few things about, when you think about the phrase, "evolutionary faith" and "evolutionary spirituality," how do you understand those terms? What do they mean for you?

Diarmuid: The first thing that springs to mind for me is that truth—primary truth—is not so much to be found in dogmas or doctrines. It's in the unfolding, evolving story—whether that's the unfolding, evolving story of my own life, or of my country, or of the planet, or of the

cosmos.

When I look back at my years (I worked for fifteen years as a counselor with [Relate](#), which is the main agency here in the United Kingdom for couples counseling) for me the most sacred times that come to mind from the counseling room were when I facilitated for couples (or maybe for one half of a couple) to be able to tell their story while knowing that they weren't in any way judged, knowing that they were fully listened to. And, my God! The sense of liberation that comes from that is so empowering! You feel you're standing on holy ground and that pure grace is at work.

And so for me, the word “evolutionary” has this idea of things being more open-ended to exploring, evolving: a story is being told. Can we become more part of that story? Can we honor the story? And can we do our part to enhance the story?—rather than falling back on dogmas or doctrines (many of which are very cerebral), some of which may have had a certain relevance at certain times in history but which if you cling to them too rigidly become ideologies that don't either liberate or empower. And so for me, “evolutionary spirituality” or “evolutionary faith” is about *process*—but process articulated through story.

Host: Beautiful!

Diarmuid: [laughter] Okay!

Host: Well, thank you, Diarmuid O'Murchu, for your Great Work in the world and for sharing your ideas and your experience with our listeners today, here on the leading edge of faith.

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