

Diarmuid O'Murchu

“Meeting God in Our Evolutionary Story”

Episode 24 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Diarmuid O'Murchu, an Irish Catholic priest and member of the Sacred Heart Missionary Order, is one of the most effective and beloved popularizers of the Great Story, or Epic of Evolution — especially in Roman Catholic circles. He is able to convey fairly radical ideas because of his depth knowledge of contemporary sciences and his decades of work as a social psychologist. Among his books are *Quantum Theology*; *Evolutionary Faith*; and *Ancestral Grace*.

HIGHLIGHTS

More than any other speaker in this series, **O'Murchu not only presents “evolution” and “story” as foundational to his spiritual worldview; he makes the two inseparable.** Thus this is an ideal episode for appreciating both **the exploratory nature of the process of evolution** and the role of **story for interpreting meaning at all scales of existence** — from the cosmic to the personal. As well, O'Murchu searches for ways to understand and experience **God as cosmic in grandeur, but also personally available.** He does so, in part, by urging us all to identify *with* the Cosmos, to **experience ourselves fully with and within Cosmos/God.** His cosmic perspective includes a naturalistic view of **the creative role of destruction and the suffering that cannot be avoided.**

Because few theologically progressive contributors in this series speak directly about Jesus and the “Incarnation” central to Christianity, the seventh question offered in this guide is devoted to O'Murchu's **reappraisal of the role of Jesus — in light of humanity's seven million year saga of evolutionary growth.** Finally, O'Murchu and the host, Michael Dowd, together weigh in with a description of **four positive trends for the Church and for humanity:** (1) more emphasis on **small Christian groups** and cell groups, (2) religious faith and language that moves **from a childlike developmental stage toward adulthood,** (3) shedding religion's attachment to ancient beliefs and instead preferencing **evidence-based knowledge,** and (4) **maturation of our species out of self-centeredness** into a contributing presence.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This dialogue is highly recommended for Roman Catholic contexts and for those curious to see how the spiritual evolutionary contributions of Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry (both of whom were Roman Catholic priests) are being carried forward in ways inspiring to lay persons. Because core Christian concepts are a central focus of this dialogue, groups (and seminaries) eager to explore evolutionary Christianity within the traditional conceptual framework will find much of value in this conversation — provided they are open to hearing quite radical interpretations.

BLOG COMMENTS

Rosaline says:

What a gift Diarmuid is to the world! For me, having read *Quantum Theology*, it was a blessing to hear him explain in such a lucid and convincing way what so many of us sense in our bones. There is a certain frustration, too, that we are so slow as a church in embracing what Diarmuid and others are teaching. The “pyramid” is alive and well and “all creation is groaning.....” Thank you so much for this outstanding and inspiring dialog.

Carol Staton says:

Wow, I thought this was the most comprehensive of all the dialogues I have listened to thus far! Thrilling!

KEYWORD TOPICS

Roman Catholic, Vatican II, Teilhard de Chardin, quantum physics, anthropology, God (melding personal with cosmic), **Stuart Kauffman, transpersonal psychology, Carl Jung, ecological health, the New Story** (Epic of Evolution), **cosmology, Stephen Hawking, Kingdom of God** (rather, “the companionship of empowerment”), **Jesus** (as subversive), **historical/Aramaic Jesus, parables, John Dominic Crossan, Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, relationality** (as core of New Story), **Celtic spirituality, sacredness of the land, dualistic thinking** (critique of), **Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Christian mysticism, creation-based spirituality, small Christian communities** (importance of), **Christian Community Movement** (success of in Brazil), **Basic Christian Community, Pope** (future of), **Southern Hemisphere** (locus of future Catholic change), **cell groups** (importance of for Christianity), **small group dynamics, religious metaphors** (critique of “parental” metaphors), **future of Christianity, developmental stages** (of faith and of individuals), **children’s education** (the necessity for change), **storytelling** (importance of), **ecological education** (the need for), **advertising** (as damaging of children), **Elisabet Sahtouris, climate change,**

humanity as self-centered, ancestral grace, Africa (as humanity’s homeland), **Thomas Aquinas, process theology, “the Great Paradox”** (that creation arises from destruction), **suffering** (role in creativity), **Alcoholics Anonymous, humility, cave paintings, incarnation** (as not limited to Jesus), **human evolution, Pinnacle Point** (ancient human artifacts), **Original Sin** (disagreement with), **monastic religious life, spirituality** (as ancestral to religion), **adult education** (need for), **evolutionary faith, evolutionary spirituality, listening** (the power of)

BIOGRAPHY

Diarmuid O’Murchu, an Irish Catholic priest and member of the Sacred Heart Missionary Order, is one the most effective and beloved popularizers of the Great Story, or Epic of Evolution — especially in Roman Catholic circles. Invited to speak throughout the world, he is able to convey some fairly radical ideas because of his depth knowledge of contemporary sciences and because of his decades of work as a social psychologist (working in Ireland and England).

In his social ministry he has worked as a couple's counselor, in bereavement work, AIDS-HIV counseling, and with homeless people and refugees. As a missionary, he leads renewal programs abroad, primarily in Asia and Africa.

O’Murchu writes books and gives talks worldwide about faith formation and religious life in the light of new insights from science and from attempts at confronting and solving the deepening ecological crisis. Most relevant to this dialogue are: *Quantum Theology* (1996), *Evolutionary Faith: Rediscovering God in Our Great Story* (2002), and *Ancestral Grace* (2008).

Diarmuid’s webpage: <http://www.diarmuid13.com/>

His blog on *National Catholic Reporter*: <http://ncronline.org/users/diarmuid-omurchu>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO

O’Murchu homily Sept 2011 (on compassion and social justice):

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

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones contributed, at the following url:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/diarmuid-omurchu-meeting-god-in-our-evolutionary-story/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Evolution as exploratory; story as foundational.** Diarmuid O’Murchu, an Irish Catholic priest, attributes his move into an evolutionary form of Christianity when he began reading the

works of **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**, a Jesuit priest and paleontologist whose most famous book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, was published after his death in 1955. At the end of the interview, O'Murchu sums up where he has come to in this evolutionary quest. He says,

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 that story? Can we do our part to enhance the story? Can we do this, 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 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.

Question 1A: *For O'Murchu, a kind of open-ended story of evolution is at the heart of how he interprets his own life and the history of everything. When you think of your own life through this lens, what (if anything) opens up for you?*

Question 1B: In this same passage, O'Murchu has this to say about where one finds **truth**,

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.

What is your response to this perspective?

2. **God: both cosmic and personal.** O'Murchu is well known for his reworking of traditional Christian concepts. With respect to our notions of “God,” for example, he has much to say in this interview. Here are some of the key statements:

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 was reading something recently by **Stuart Kauffman** where he tries to put forward this idea that perhaps our 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**, and in turn has obviously damaged our own spiritual potential. So one of the things I'm trying to rework is how to embrace and include the personal within this big cosmic view of God.

My way of trying to re-work this is to draw upon **Jungian psychology**, which talks 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 love of human story** as part of our entire makeup as creatures of God.

Question 2: *O’Murchu makes clear at the outset that he is by no means finished in his spiritual quest to **refresh his concept of God** so that “God” includes the full grandeur and creativity of the Cosmos, but is also personal and accessible. Are you attracted to this quest? That is, do you think such a quest is important? And how well is he doing?*

3. **Kingdom of God: a new translation.** In giving a thumbnail sketch of his personal story, O’Murchu mentions that he had a classical education, including learning Latin and Greek. His facility with languages allows him to press into theological inquiry far beyond the reach of lay persons. Notably, he re-interprets one of Jesus’ core teachings, “the kingdom of God,” which Jesus would have spoken in the Aramaic language, not Greek. O’Murchu’s reinterpretation of this core Christian concept **erases its usual hierarchical, otherworldly, and exclusivist characteristics**. He explains,

Since the 1950s, scripture scholars have been revisiting that phrase “Kingdom of God” in the Gospels and increasingly realizing that **Jesus used that phrase in a subversive way**—challenging the whole power structure of kingship, which was then a major element of the people’s worldview.

[“Kingdom of God”] would be better expressed in the words **“the companionship of empowerment.”** That’s what Jesus was really trying to express. He was challenging patriarchal and linear power; 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.

Question 3A: *How important is it to you to learn about new interpretations or translations of what theologians consider to be core Christian concepts? Do these kinds of doctrinal issues matter to you? Or have you already sorted through and reinterpreted standard biblical language in ways that work well for you?*

Question 3B: *Do you find O’Murchu’s interpretation of “kingdom of God” attractive? Why or why not?*

4. **A mythic sketch of O’Murchu’s spiritual journey.** O’Murchu not only promotes the importance of story, he uses it to mythologize his own personal spiritual journey, which he characterizes as a **“resonance”** between four spiritual streams: land-based, Celtic, Catholic, and (most recently) the new cosmic story. Here is how he recounts his spiritual story:

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 our own food; we killed the pig every year for meat. Even though my dad didn’t speak in terms of the **sacredness of the land** as a modern person might, he obviously had a clear sense of how sacred it

was. I was immersed in this as a child. It's about 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 my soul. 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 science research and study, the resonance deepened. What happened 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 in ways that I was only able to name several years later.

Question 4: *Have you ever tried to describe **the main threads in your spiritual or worldview journey** — in a single paragraph? What, in short, would be the main threads coming together — or the major moments of unraveling and transition?*

5. **Beyond the Nature v. God distinction.** O'Murchu speaks of how his Christian upbringing imprinted his mind with thinking in dualistic ways — notably, that God and Nature must be distinct. He recalls,

The dualisms played a huge role in terms of my understandings, in my articulation, my prayers, my language, and so forth. **Dualisms** as: air versus heaven, body versus soul, matter versus spirit. When I began reading **Teilhard**, that was the beginning of my realizing the terrible split within myself and beginning to heal it and build the bridges over it. In other words, by **growing into a deeper sense of what the sacred was**—and ideally this has to be for everybody—through the natural world and not through a dualistic separation from it.

Question 5: *Do you join O'Murchu in celebrating a relaxation of strict distinctions in religious categories? Notably, have you also taken down the walls between how you understand **God** and how you understand **Nature**? If so, do you recall whether the transition to more flexible categories was gradual and easy? Or, if Creator and Creation are still very distinct categories for you religiously, are you nevertheless comfortable discussing these matters with Christians and secularists who differ with you on this point?*

6. **Suffering is not to be eliminated.** O'Murchu says, “When we look at the big story, we do see times of **horrendous destruction**, chaos, and so forth. So instead of seeing that as somehow totally alien to God, it is also a part of what I call, “The Great Paradox”—through which God’s creativity works.” He continues on the theme of suffering:

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. . . . 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**.

Question 6: *What is your response to O’Murchu’s perspective on destruction and suffering?*

7. **Reinterpreting Incarnation and the role of Jesus.** O’Murchu talks about his book, *Ancestral Grace*, which charts **the evolutionary rise of humanity over the course of seven million years**. Given this deep-time perspective, the traditional understanding of Jesus will not suffice. O’Murchu suggests,

The second part of the book for a Christian readership is probably the single most challenging aspect of it. **I’m revisiting the word “incarnation.”** In conventional Christian theology, we understand *incarnation* as God becomes flesh in the person of Jesus. But it seems to me, 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. But in that 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 is 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.

Question 7: *What is your response to O’Murchu’s 7-million-year perspective on the course of humanity, the Incarnation, and an evolutionary understanding of Jesus?*

8. **How the Church should grow into the future:** O’Murchu describes **two positive trends** for Christianity into the future. First, the importance of **small Christian communities**, or what Michael Dowd calls “cell groups.” And second, Church practices that **treat adult congregants as adults** in their faith walk — not as children. He suggests that Christianity ought to,

. . . reclaim and **return 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. 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.

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 ‘adult’.

Question 8A: *What is your response to the first trend that O’Murchu advocates for the future of the Church: more emphasis on small groups (or, what Michael Dowd calls, “cell groups”)? And where, in either religious or secular settings, have you experienced the power of small groups for **authentic communication** and support about what is real and important?*

Question 8B: *What about the second trend that O’Murchu views as positive: religious practices that treat **adults** as adults? Have you had experience in religious institutions where you felt that you were related to, or dealt with, in a less-than-fully-adult way?*

9. **From beliefs to knowledge:** Host **Michael Dowd** concurs with O’Murchu on the importance of moving into an adult phase of faith, which he sees as happening right now. Dowd calls this transition “**a rite of passage.**” Dowd says,

We’re in an ordeal right now. We’re moving from **our childhood as a species**, where we were primarily guided by **beliefs**. Children of all traditions, of all cultures, are guided primarily by beliefs. Children are sponges for beliefs; they 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 and 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 gave 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 within the process of our own maturing.

Question 9: *What is your response to Dowd’s suggestion that humanity is undergoing a ‘rite of passage’ **from beliefs to knowledge**, similar to what we as individuals go through? Do you agree or disagree, and why?*

10. **From selfishness to contribution:** Host **Michael Dowd** describes a second ongoing cultural-religious shift in this way:

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**. 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. I think our species is going through that shift, as well. We’re now realizing that the world wasn’t made for us, but we were made for the world.

Question 10: *Do you find it helpful to interpret humanity today as developing collectively in ways similar to how we as individuals develop as we mature? **What role could and should religious institutions** play in helping us successfully make this transition?*

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