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## Commemorating the Reformation: An Opportunity for Common Witness

Donna Geernaert<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In its *Report* on common commemoration of the Reformation, the Lutheran–Catholic Commission on Unity notes that this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary invites: “a discerning, self-critical look at ourselves, not only in our history, but also today.”<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with an affirmation in the *Official Common Statement* which enabled the 1999 signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*: “Lutherans and Catholics will continue their efforts ecumenically in their common witness to interpret the message of justification in language relevant for human beings today, and with reference both to individual and social concerns of our times.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, both Lutherans and Catholics are aware of the many challenges to evangelization in our current global and secular society.

As followers of Christ, Christians believe that in Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Word, the second Person of the Trinity, becomes human. This Christian understanding of God as Triune and of morality/spirituality as incarnate all flow from this basic act of faith. This is what is distinctive about Christianity and what believers are called to proclaim as good news. For proclamation to be seen as “good news,” however, it needs to relate to its context, the cosmology or view of the world, in which it is proclaimed: for Clement of Alexandria–Hellenism, for Augustine–Platonism, for Thomas Aquinas–Aristotelianism, and for Ignatius of Loyola–Renaissance Humanism. For many people in contemporary society, cosmology today is associated with a scientific view of the universe understood in terms of its evolution over immense periods of time and through the vast extent of space.

How will the Christian vision be proclaimed within this new context? This is precisely the topic John Haught takes up in his effort to develop a theology of evolution. He begins by noting that Darwinian science is experiencing a vigorous renewal in the contemporary intellectual world and that people of all faiths, not just Christianity, “are faced with the question of whether their venerable teachings can honestly survive evolutionary portrayals of nature, humanity, ethics and religion.” More specifically, he asks: “Hasn’t Darwinian science placed in serious doubt the sense that we inhabit a meaningful universe? Or is it instead possible that what scientific skeptics often take to be the religiously ruinous consequences of Darwinian thought are in fact fresh openings to mysterious sacred depths of reality previously unfathomed?”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Geernaert was the former director of ecumenical and interfaith relations for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and taught at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax.

<sup>2</sup> Lutheran – Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, forward to “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran–Catholic Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017” *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service* 144 (2014): 126.

<sup>3</sup> Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Official Common Statement in Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*, ed., J. Gros, H. Meyer, and W. G. Rusch (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 580.

<sup>4</sup> John Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Second Edition, 2008), 10-11. Contemporary religious thought, he claims, has yet to make a complete transition to a post-

## An Evolving Cosmos

At the time of the Reformation, Copernicus (1473-1543) had just begun to work on his heliocentric theory (manuscript published in 1543); Galileo (1564-1642) and Darwin (1809-1882) had not yet begun to influence Christian thought. For Catholics and Reformers alike, the first three chapters of Genesis were regarded as a literal account of the origins of the universe. Thanks to biblical scholarship over the past half century, many Christians today are more inclined to look for theological meaning in these creation narratives. When Genesis 1 is interpreted within the context of the Babylonian epic of creation, for example, the Bible's unequivocal affirmation of the goodness of creation and the dignity of every human being called to share God's Sabbath rest is readily apparent.<sup>5</sup> And, Phyllis Trible's careful exegesis has shown that Genesis 2, like Genesis 1, depicts a basic male/female equality. From her research, it seems clear that the assertion of male dominance occurs within the framework of a divine judgement on human disobedience and is a distortion of the harmonious relationship envisioned in the covenant formula of Genesis 2:23. Thus, both creation stories implicitly condemn the whole domination/subjugation pattern of relating.<sup>6</sup>

These are good theological points but reflect a basically static cosmology. God is outside the universe; calls everything into existence—earth, sea, sky, plants, animals, humans—one by one, each in isolation from the other. This doesn't fit the contemporary scientific view of how the universe came into existence. Does this mean that God doesn't exist or does traditional biblical cosmology need to be reinterpreted? Can Christian belief in God be maintained in this new context?<sup>7</sup> For Thomas Aquinas, a mistake in how creation is understood will necessarily lead to a mistake in the understanding of who God is.<sup>8</sup> When Genesis is read as science, it will necessarily lead to a mistaken understanding of creation.

Advances in science and technology over the past century have produced an explosion of information about the universe. While astronomers scan the length and breadth of outer space, physicists explore the inner workings of sub-atomic particles and waves. At both macro and micro cosmic levels, this research confirms the vastness of space and time, the underlying unity of the universe, the dynamic interplay of chaos and creativity. There is a growing scientific consensus about the expanding universe that originated in a burst of energy some fourteen billion years ago and about the evolving earth community that has become conscious in the emergence of the human. In an emerging universe, physicist Brian Swimme says, "time's dynamic reveals itself in an ongoing creativity," everything is "genetically related," and "interconnected". "Every being on earth is implicated in the

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Darwinian world. "To a great extent theologians still think and write almost as though Darwin had never lived." 2.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being Christian?* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), 201, says it would be "as if a rich man told his butler to stop serving at table and come and sit down with him and have a glass of port."

<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 72-143.

<sup>7</sup> In his 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Pope John Paul II says that truth cannot contradict truth and notes that the theory of evolution is now widely recognized as more than a hypothesis. See, Ilia Delio, introduction to *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013), xvii. Yet, despite the pope's affirmation that there is no opposition between evolution and the doctrine of faith according to *Humani generis*, a growing number of Catholics believe that evolution is incompatible with their faith because it suggests a world without God.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Judy Cannato, *Radical Amazement* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2006), 7.

functioning of the earth as a whole; and the earth as a whole is intrinsic to the functioning of any particular life system.”<sup>9</sup>

While materialist evolutionists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett would say that the evolutionary process excludes the possibility of God’s existence, Christian thinkers such as Ilia Delio, John Haught, Elizabeth Johnson and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin find evolution compatible with their faith. Their positions are supported by: 1) a willingness to recognize spirit as an integral part of the evolving universe—something that can be observed and must be taken into account within the context of the process as a whole; 2) an understanding of who God is and how God relates to all of creation. John Haught identifies the importance of naming the kind of God who creates and cares for an evolving cosmos. In their efforts to find common ground with scientific skeptics, he says, theologians sometimes tend to concede ideas about divine power and intelligence which may be quite out of step with actual religious experience. Instead, he states: “Religious thinkers can deal with evolution in a meaningful way only if they do so on the basis of their own experience of the sacred mediated through the faith communities to which they belong.”<sup>10</sup>

For contemporary Christian evolutionists, the thought of Teilhard de Chardin is seminal. As a scientist, Teilhard approaches the evolutionary process as a phenomenon. Seeing evolution as organically cohesive, he says, the human faculty of thought reveals consciousness/spirit as a fundamental property of the universe.<sup>11</sup> From the fact that a more developed, conscious interiority always corresponds experimentally to an external structure of greater organic complexity, he detects a law of complexity-consciousness. As units become increasingly centred, complex, and conscious, certain critical points mark a change of state. When matter complexifies to a certain degree, it becomes organic, life appears; when living forms achieve a certain degree of complexity, consciousness becomes centred on itself and thought appears. These critical points mark qualitative changes of state initiated through quantitative increases in bio-chemical complexity. The process of increasing complexity and consciousness can be expected to continue as human society provides a milieu which enables numerous individuals to combine their reflective efforts and so, to increase the scope and clarity of reflection.

In applying the law of complexity-consciousness to human society, however, Teilhard is aware of human autonomy and warns of an organic crisis in evolution: “There is a danger that the elements of the world should refuse to serve the world—because they think; or more

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Swimme, “Science: A Partner in Creating the Vision,” in *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*, ed., Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987), 86-89. A major point in Christian theology relates to the belief that God is One existing in a Trinity of Persons. And, it is mutual interrelatedness that maintains the identity and difference of Persons in this Three-in-One God. In brief, God’s To-Be is To-Be-In-Relationship. In cosmological terms, this offers “a symbolic picture of totally shared life at the heart of the universe.” See, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity in Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1973), 250; Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 222.

<sup>10</sup> Haught, preface, x. See also, 116-117 where he notes that in dialogue with evolutionary scientists, theologians typically find themselves guarding some bleary notions of divine power and rationality rather than bringing forward faith’s more troubling images of compassionate mystery pouring itself out into the world in unrestrained and vulnerable love.

<sup>11</sup> Materialist evolutionists, such as Dennett and Dawkins, who ignore or deny the reality of subjectivity go beyond the realm of empirical science and leave out any satisfactory account of how or why subjective experience and eventually consciousness entered into the cosmic process at all. See, Haught, 173-179.

precisely that the world should refuse itself when perceiving itself through reflection.”<sup>12</sup> What will motivate humanity to continue to contribute to cosmic evolution, he asks. With and in humanity, the most complex segment of cosmic evolution has emerged as a reflective centre, a person. This marks a critical point, a change of state, which must be retained if human persons are to choose to commit themselves to the future. In this context, Teilhard maintains, love is the only synthesizing energy which can release all of the person’s uniqueness and creativity. And, if universal love is to be a concrete prospect for the future, he claims, cosmic evolution must culminate in an element of personal form. Thus, he posits the existence of Omega, a personal and transcendent centre, capable of stimulating and sustaining human energy and commitment to the cosmic process. Not surprisingly, he finds in the Christian tradition a well-defined figure whose cosmic functions are precisely the same as those which he attributes to the Omega of evolution. The presence of Christ-Omega provides Teilhard with the “very cross-check” his evolutionary theory requires.<sup>13</sup>

Teilhard arrives at the identity and character of Omega, as the culmination of an experimental quest, i.e., by extending the law of complexity-consciousness to what he perceives as its logical term. “Had I been an unbeliever ... I think that my inner exploration would have led me to the same spiritual peak.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time, he doesn’t hesitate to recognize that through his upbringing as a Catholic Christian he had already encountered an incarnate God who coincides with the ultimate centre of consolidation demanded by the evolution of reflective life. To those who would critique Teilhard’s phenomenology as being contaminated by his Christian faith, he would respond that their phenomenology is likewise contaminated by their materialist beliefs “which closes them off from the most obvious feature of evolution, namely its bringing about new being.” Every scientist has an implicit worldview that determines what they decide to focus on or leave out of their analysis.<sup>15</sup>

## Rethinking the Incarnation

Teilhard’s law of complexity-consciousness allows him, and other Christian thinkers, to affirm a spiritual dimension in cosmic evolution and a cosmic dimension in Christian spirituality. At the same time, the adoption of an evolutionary perspective will require new understandings of the incarnation, the person of Jesus, and Christ’s cosmic role. In brief, “a Christ whose features do not adapt themselves to the requirements of a world that is evolutive in structure will tend more and more to be eliminated out of hand.”<sup>16</sup>

In the incarnation, Christians say, God becomes human. But, why would God choose to do such a preposterous thing? The Latin theological tradition affirmed that Christ came because of human sin. Simply stated, had there been no illness, there would have been no need to send for a physician. Following the Greek tradition, a number of Franciscan theologians saw the incarnation not as an isolated event but as integral to the possibility of creation itself. “Since perfect love cannot will anything less than the perfection of love, Christ

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans., Bernard Wall (London: Fontana Books, 1959), 253-254. See, 328-338, for the law of complexity-consciousness.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “How I Believe,” in *Christianity and Evolution*, trans., René Hague (London: Collins, 1971), 128.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Heart of Matter,” in *The Heart of Matter*, trans., René Hague (London: Collins, 1978), 39.

<sup>15</sup> Haught, 89-90.

<sup>16</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, “Christology and Evolution,” in *Christianity and Evolution*, 78.

would have come ... even if there were no sin and thus no need for redemption.”<sup>17</sup> The integral linking of creation and incarnation as expressed in these theologies offers a concept of God which is consistent with contemporary evolutionary theory. Interdependent and coextensive with space and time, creation and incarnation are reflections of a credible God who is infinitely communicative and able to communicate in a finite way, a God who enters intimately into the created world with all its history and materiality. An incarnation which occurs in a structurally convergent evolutionary process enables Christ both to retain the preciseness of his humanity and to become co-extensive with the physical immensities of space and time.

For Teilhard, the incarnation signifies Christ’s “definitive hold” on the universe. Having materialized himself within a space-time continuum, Christ is “so engrained in the visible world” that he cannot be extracted from it without “rocking the foundations of the universe.”<sup>18</sup> From an evolutionary perspective, nothing can be absorbed into things except through the road of matter. Thus, Christ “could penetrate the stuff of the cosmos, could pour himself into the life blood of the universe only by first dissolving himself in matter, later to be reborn from it.”<sup>19</sup> And, because every element in the universe is interrelated: “In every creature there exists physically ... a certain relationship that *all being* has to Christ—a particular adaptation to Christ of created essence – *something of Christ*, in short, that is born and develops and gives to the whole individual ... its ultimate personality and final ontological value.”<sup>20</sup> Ilia Delio comments: “The iron that ran through his veins, the phosphorous and calcium that fortified his bones, the sodium and potassium that facilitated the transmission of signals through his nerves—all make the incarnation a truly cosmic event. ... his humanity is our humanity, his cosmic earthly life is ours as well.”<sup>21</sup> Humanity becomes capable of experiencing, discovering, and loving God in the whole length, breadth and depth of the world in movement. This “is a prayer that can only be made in space-time.”<sup>22</sup>

While an evolutionary worldview which looks to the end rather than the beginning of the process leaves little scope for a discussion of Christ’s earthly life, Teilhard constantly affirms the significance of the historical person of Jesus. It is “the Man of Nazareth,” he says, who provides the “historical germ” which gives Christ-Omega its whole consistence.<sup>23</sup> The essence of Christianity “is neither more nor less than the belief in the unification of the world in God by the incarnation.”<sup>24</sup> When the term “incarnation” is applied to the birth of Christ, therefore, it indicates a particular event which may be regarded as a “specially heightened expression of a process having cosmic dimensions.”<sup>25</sup> In a cosmic evolution which develops

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<sup>17</sup> Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 57 expressing the thought of Duns Scotus. See, also 53-65.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “My Universe,” in *Science and Christ*, trans., René Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 61.

<sup>19</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, “My Universe,” in *Science and Christ*, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Universal Element,” in *Writings in Time of War*, trans., René Hague (London: Collins, 1968), 297.

<sup>21</sup> Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 55

<sup>22</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 325.

<sup>23</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, “Christianity and Evolution,” in *Christianity and Evolution*, 181.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Sketch of a Personalistic Universe,” in *Human Energy*, trans., J. M. Cohen (London: Collins, 1969), 91.

<sup>25</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, “Some General Views on the Essence of Christianity,” in *Christianity and Evolution*, 135.

through a mechanism of discontinuity in continuity (a series of critical points), the birth of Christ is both continuous with all that went before it and at the same time radically new. "Jesus Christ is not the great exception to the universe but the climax of a long development whereby the world becomes aware of itself and comes into the direct presence of God."<sup>26</sup> Yet, Jesus enters the evolutionary trajectory bringing a power of newness, "a new relatedness, and a new immediacy of God's presence."<sup>27</sup>

The incarnation represents God's self-immersion in the created universe in the form of a historical person capable of stimulating the love which is intrinsic to the establishment of personal relations. For Teilhard, the birth of Christ represents a critical point in the evolution of love (amorisation) similar to the critical point of reflection which marked the advent of the human species.<sup>28</sup> Bringing a new consciousness of love into the universe, Christ is a new centring factor, a "strange attractor," who holds the entire process together and moves it forward toward greater complexity and unity.<sup>29</sup> In practical terms, Ilia Delio speaks of a dynamic of "whole-making" in the mission and ministry of Jesus. "The reign of God preached by Jesus meant a new consciousness of being in the world, a consciousness of relatedness, inclusivity, non-duality, and community."<sup>30</sup>

At the heart of Christian faith is the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth is the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14). When the Word is made flesh, God embraces the long, interconnected history of life in all its complexity and diversity. In Christ, God enters into biological life and is now with evolving creation, with all forms of life in their suffering limitations. This is a "deep" incarnation, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence. In today's world where countless forms of life have been destroyed or are under threat, the cross of Christ reveals God's identification with creation in all its complexity, struggle and pain.<sup>31</sup>

Through Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul says, the "Yes" of God to humanity and the "Amen" of humanity to God become a concrete human reality (2 Cor 1:18-20). Seeking to find an inner relationship between the Christ-event and evolution, Karl Rahner says that Jesus can be understood as both the self-transcendence of the evolving universe into God and as God's self-communication to the universe. Jesus is the event of salvation because he is both God's self-gift to creation and the radical yes of creation to God.<sup>32</sup> "His birth and gradual

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<sup>26</sup> Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, 55, with reference to the work of Denis Edwards.

<sup>27</sup> Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, 55-56. She suggests a new Big Bang. "Jesus brings a 'new heart' to humanity, both on the individual and the collective planes. Humanity becomes a new 'creative center' within the evolutionary process in such a way that the path of this evolution now becomes explicitly directed; evolution has a goal." Cannato, 70-76, likens the newness of Christ to photosynthesis and the emergence of the first cells.

<sup>28</sup> While every revelatory event, including the incarnation, may be regarded as a manifestation of Omega's personal presence, it is only through the incarnation that Omega enters the evolutionary process in the form of a historical person. It is, therefore, the actualization of personal presence that marks the incarnation as a critical point in the amorisation of the universe.

<sup>29</sup> Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, 142-146, reflects on Christ as the "strange attractor".

<sup>30</sup> Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, 63, further developed on 64-66.

<sup>31</sup> Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 58-60, summarizes various approaches to "deep incarnation".

<sup>32</sup> Karl Rahner, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World," in *Theological Investigations V*, trans., Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 158.

consummation constitutes physically the only definitive reality in which the evolution of the world is expressed.”<sup>33</sup>

## Reformation Insights

Through his personal quest for a gracious God and intense study of Scripture, Martin Luther was led to the joyful discovery that God’s righteousness is a bestowal of righteousness, not a demand that condemns the sinner.<sup>34</sup> In light of this experience, he sees the “doctrine of justification through faith alone” as the criterion on which the church stands or falls, the guide and judge over all parts of Christian doctrine. It is “the heart of the gospel because the gospel message in its specific sense is the proclamation of God’s free and merciful promises”<sup>35</sup> in the crucified Christ. Formulated in response to a specific set of circumstances in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Luther’s witness to the liberating promise of God’s grace and focus on a theology of the cross offer insight into contemporary views of who God is and how God relates to the evolving cosmos.<sup>36</sup>

The evolution of life-forms has a clear direction—from simple to increasingly complex states of being.<sup>37</sup> Thus, John Haught claims, the coherence and intelligibility of the cosmos can be discerned only by looking towards its ultimate future not by dwelling on the atomic diffusion of its remotest past.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, he maintains: “Evolution is rendered possible only because of the temporal clearing made available when the future faithfully introduces relevant new possibilities.”<sup>39</sup> Evolutionary novelty, he asserts, presents a particular challenge to scientific materialism with its atomistic, reductive inquiry into the past. In brief, the universe “is a creative project yet unfinished, and because it is unfinished it still has a future.”<sup>40</sup> Further, it is the vision of a “constantly arriving and renewing future” which “can suitably accommodate both the data of evolutionary biology and the extravagant claims of biblical religion about how a promising God relates to the world.”<sup>41</sup>

According to Haught, recognition of the continuous emergence of newness through the interplay of law and chance in the evolutionary process is part of Darwin’s gift to theology, a challenge and an opportunity to reclaim features of Christian faith “too easily

<sup>33</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, “Christology and Evolution,” in *Christianity and Evolution*, 89.

<sup>34</sup> Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, “Martin Luther—Witness to Jesus Christ” in *Growth in Agreement II*, 439.

<sup>35</sup> US Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue, “Common Statement,” in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed., H. G. Anderson, T. A. Murphy, and J. A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House: 1985), 25. “From Conflict to Communion,” begins with Luther’s affirmation: “True theology and the knowledge of God are in the crucified Christ.”

<sup>36</sup> Eric W. Gritsch, “The Origins of Lutheran Teaching on Justification,” in *Justification by Faith*, 162-171. See also, “From Conflict to Communion,” 138-143.

<sup>37</sup> Haught, 137, identifies scientific evidence of directionality in the universe. See also, Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 117.

<sup>38</sup> Haught, 101, with reference to Teilhard de Chardin argues that the world’s intelligibility cannot be found in the cosmic past where everything “gradually fades out into the incoherence of a primordial multiplicity.”

<sup>39</sup> Haught, 94, goes on to state: “It is not the occurrence of contingency that brings about the future, but rather it is the arrival of the future to allow events to have the status of contingency—that is, to be more than just the inevitable outcome of past deterministic causes.”

<sup>40</sup> Haught, 125-126. It is unthinkable, he says, that novel events could arise out of a fixed past. Novelty must arise in connection from what is and what has been but it would not be really new if it were simply the algorithmic unfolding of a fully deterministic past.

<sup>41</sup> Haught, 95.



smothered by the deadening disguise of order and design.”<sup>42</sup> Specifically, he sees a new understanding of divine transcendence where the reality of God shifts from “the One who abides vertically ‘up above’ to the One who comes into the world from ‘up ahead’, out of the realm of the future.”<sup>43</sup> This, he maintains, corresponds closely to the God of the Bible who goes before the people through exodus, exile and return, who speaks through the prophets promising to make all things new, who frees Hebrew slaves and brings life to barren women. When the Bible speaks of the dramatic action of God in the world, it is giving expression to generations of human experience in which an unpredictable and surprising future has often interrupted the normal course of events. In this context, therefore, it is the future that is “really real” and the most distinctive contribution of biblical religion to human life and consciousness is its impression that reality should be shaped by promise. Authentic faith, he says, is openness to a divine promise pointing in the direction of a future yet to come, anticipating the arrival of the reign of God and the new creation.<sup>44</sup>

Evolution happens, John Haught says, “because of the ‘coming of God’ toward *the entire universe* from out of an always elusive future.”<sup>45</sup> God is identified as the Absolute Future, an infinitely liberating source of new possibilities and new life.<sup>46</sup> As the Absolute Future, moreover, God takes the form of an inexhaustible futurity whose continuous arrival into the present is always restrained enough to allow the cosmos to achieve its own independent evolution. This is an intimate divine absence associated with the notion of *kenosis*. As the horizon of all that is and all that is coming to be, God influences the cosmos by holding out before it new ways of becoming itself. Creation is conceived as an ongoing evolution in which every interrelated cosmic element has a unique and unrepeatable contribution to make. God’s power and action take the form of persuasive love rather than coercive force. God loves the cosmos and all its various elements fully and unconditionally. Yet, “love does not absorb, annihilate or force itself upon the beloved. Instead, it longs for the beloved to be self-actualizing, so as to become more and more other.”<sup>47</sup> As the infinite capacity for self-giving love, divine power enables the integrity and autonomy of the other; it works in and through creation to bring life. This differs radically from all concepts of power as the capacity to dominate others. For Haught, this suggests a theology of evolution which not only enhances an understanding of how the God of the Bible interacts with the cosmos but also supports current scientific views of the autonomous, random, and impersonal features of the evolutionary process.

Jesus’ proclamation of the good news of the reign of God led to his being sentenced to death. Did this have to happen? Could salvation have been accomplished in another way?

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<sup>42</sup> Haught, 5. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 55-121, provides a thorough review of Darwin’s theory and its development in relation to more recent scientific discoveries.

<sup>43</sup> Haught, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Haught, 102-103, 94-95, 127, 156.

<sup>45</sup> Haught, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Haught, 127-128, 214-217. It could be argued that the unfinished character of the evolving cosmos allows not only for the suffering and struggle depicted by Darwinian science but also provides a context which gives a real focus to human endeavour. According to Haught, 145-152, the doctrine of original sin still has meaning in pointing to the fact that each of us is born into a world where the accumulated effects of despair and sin have destroyed and diminished what is good and have restricted what is possible. Cletus Wessels, *Jesus in the New Universe Story* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 177-186, outlines positions on original sin. Cannato, pp. 107-114, reflects on personal black hole experiences.

<sup>47</sup> Haught, 43.

Could Jesus have brought salvation by living to old age and dying peacefully in his sleep? Ilia Delia thinks not. Such a scenario, she says: “fails to accept fully the integral relationship between God and creation. Death is not merely a surd, the unfortunate product of creation. Rather, death is integral to who God is – self-giving love.”<sup>48</sup> Without death, there is no fullness of life. As is evident in the fourteen billion years of cosmic history, the giving over of life on behalf of ever-expanding creativity is integral to life itself. The death of Jesus shows the type of engagement which leads to evolutionary progress. It highlights the physical reality of God’s salvific action. It is what makes Christian thought so profoundly different from various beliefs in an undifferentiated universal spirit that would make a person “ashamed of being in the body.”<sup>49</sup>

The cross is key to an understanding not only of sin and human nature but also of the divine nature because it discloses the vulnerability of God’s love. With reference to the crucified Christ as the “image of the invisible God,” Jürgen Moltmann states: “God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity. Everything that can be said of God is to be found in this Christ event.” In brief, the cross signifies a God who is radically in love with the world and ultimately concerned for it. The cross is “the unsurpassable self-definition of God.” Walter Kasper writes: “On the cross the incarnation of God reaches its true meaning and purpose. ... it requires omnipotence to be able to surrender oneself and give oneself away; and it requires omnipotence to be able to take oneself back in the giving and to preserve the independence and freedom of the recipient. Only an almighty love can give itself wholly to the other and be a helpless love.” In the weakness and powerlessness of the cross, God’s love is shown as the power to transform suffering and death from within to new life. It is precisely God’s self-emptying love that empowers creatures to do new things, to evolve.<sup>50</sup>

“Evolution bears witness to the fidelity of divine love,” Ilia Delio states, “because every cosmic death is, in some way, transformed into new life.”<sup>51</sup> Without the raising of Jesus from the dead, Paul writes, Christian proclamation and faith is “in vain” (1 Cor 15:3-20). It was their experience of the resurrection which enabled the discouraged and frightened disciples to see the crucifixion as an event of salvation, reversing the scandal of Jesus’ death and fulfilling the ancient prophecies (Acts 2:16-17). Drawing on the Eastern Christian tradition, which has always seen Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection as transforming the world forever, Karl Rahner sees the resurrection as a change at the deepest level of things in the universe. Jesus, in his humanity and as part of a creaturely world, is forever taken into God. What has occurred in Jesus is an event for the whole of creation, the beginning of the transformation of reality from within.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, 191, with reference to Miroslav Volf.

<sup>50</sup> Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, 86-87, includes quotes from Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, and Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*. Haught holds a similar position on the self-emptying love of God as the condition for the autonomy of the evolving cosmos, 119-122.

<sup>51</sup> Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, 85.

<sup>52</sup> Edwards, 87, quoting Karl Rahner, “Dogmatic Questions on Easter,” in *Theological Investigations IV*, trans., Karl-H Kruger (New York: Seabury, 1966), 128. Rahner sees the death and resurrection of Jesus as two distinct sides of the one event. In death, Jesus freely hands his whole bodily existence into the hands of a loving God. In the resurrection, God adopts creaturely reality as God’s own reality.

## Conclusion

While evolutionary science can, and has been used to deny the possibility of God's existence, some of the concepts it endorses – movement, novelty, open future – seem more consistent with aspects of biblical theology and early Christian tradition than the static categories of thought which dominated preaching and teaching over many years. Assuming that a religious response to materialist biology will best be formulated on the basis of the experience of the sacred mediated through the faith communities to which each individual belongs, reflection on the impact of evolution on contemporary cosmology would seem to be an important area of ecumenical cooperation. To date, it has been relatively easy to engage ecumenically, and even from an interfaith perspective, on questions of ecology but response to the intellectual challenge of evolutionary science has remained a largely academic pursuit. If churches are truly committed to proclaiming the gospel in the context of contemporary unbelief, the findings of academic research will need to be made available to the large number of Christians who continue to believe the Genesis narratives are to be read as scientific fact.<sup>53</sup> This is a fundamental issue which not only enables believers to ignore scientific thought as unfounded and limits their ability to perceive the grandeur of God commensurate with the vastness of space-time in an expanding cosmos but also allows scientists to dismiss Christian belief as outdated and restricts their ability to encounter the mystery of God at the core of the universe. Efforts to reconcile the long-standing gap between science and religion could well be seen as an ecumenical project appropriate to commemorate this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation.

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<sup>53</sup> Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*, introduction, xvi, states that polls indicate 46 percent of the American population believes that Adam and Eve actually existed and were created fully formed by God.