



“Evolutionary Christian Spirituality – Part 2”

This morning I continue the series I began last week on the meaning of “evolutionary Christianity”. After three congregational retreats, questionnaires to the congregations, and a whole lot of discernment, the Board will be presenting a proposal at the next congregational meeting at the end of June for a new Purpose Statement:

We are called by God to be an open-hearted, open-minded community, teaching and practicing evolutionary Christianity.

Last week’s sermon, which you can download on our website, traces the rationale for shifting from “progressive” Christianity to “evolutionary” Christianity. Essentially, “evolutionary” includes everything we mean by “progressive” but it provides a lot of added value. What is that added value?

Roman Catholic priest and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin may have been the first self-declared evolutionary Christian. For his troubles the church silenced him. He was way out in front of the curve, and this is typically how the church has treated its visionaries throughout history. Here’s what this scientist-priest said about evolution:

“Is evolution a theory, a system, or a hypothesis? It is much more: it is a general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, and all systems must bow and satisfy henceforth if they are to be thinkable and true. Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow.”

This might not seem terribly threatening to us – no reason to silence a priest, for example. But at the time – and still today in some Christian circles – there was no theological model that could make room for both God *and* evolution. Either God was responsible for the diversity of life on earth, or nature was – end of discussion. (But it was actually just the beginning of the discussion.)

Now, when Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was talking about evolution, he’s including what Darwin meant by evolution – the biological process by which life adapts to changing life conditions, giving rise to variations within species along with whole new species. But he goes beyond Darwin, in recognizing that it wasn’t merely external shapes, features, and functions of creatures. It wasn’t just matter that evolved. Consciousness evolved.

As a paleontologist, he was making fossil discoveries that supported the Darwinian theory of

natural selection. He loved his work as a scientist. He loved knowing that everything evolves. After the Big Bang, or as Brian Swimme likes to call it, *The Great Radiance*, hydrogen and helium evolved into star fields, galaxies produced stars that went supernova, in those explosions the heavy elements necessary for life on earth were forged, then our solar system came to life when bacteria emerged on our beloved planet. Single celled bacteria without a nucleus teamed up in a symbiotic dynamic to form nucleated bacteria, and from there life took off. It required what scientists call “deep-time” for certain. De Chardin knew first hand that everything on a *physical* level has an innate capacity to adapt to new life conditions. This just comes as standard equipment with the universe.

But it began to dawn on him there was an interior dimension to this process which he called “complexity consciousness”. The evolution of exteriors had an interior correlate. He was one of the first scientists to postulate that consciousness existed at all levels of reality, even in rocks – a kind of proto-consciousness. Matter and consciousness are co-nascent; they are literally born together. As well, he went beyond the idea of “survival of the fittest” as the explanation for this increasing complexity. Some force from within – a fundamental principle of the universe – was behind, within, and in front of this drive. As a Christian he postulated that it was Christ – wooing all of reality from an end point of history he called The Omega Point – to realize its divine nature. History was going somewhere

– it was for the divinization of matter and consciousness. And the role of the church was to be a catalyst – to be in the living presence of the Christ was to evolve according to de Chardin.

As de Chardin says: “all systems must bow (to this light, to this curve of history) if they are to be thinkable and true.”

This applies to religion and religious consciousness. The spirituality, the animating, authentic energy within the necessary, but sometimes limiting, bureaucratic and institutional structures of religion, must be evolutionary. Authentic spirituality needs to be connected to reality as science has now revealed it to be. Christianity, to use the title of Bishop John Spong’s book, “must change or die.” Either we’re adapt to changing life conditions or we will be left behind. Nothing personal, but nevertheless true.

My friend and colleague, Rev. David Ewart, who serves a congregation on the North Shore posted a video with graphics on YouTube that illustrates the trends in the United Church of Canada since our inception in 1925. Things are, to put it mildly, trending downward. If they continue as they have since peaking in the 1950’s, it is pretty clear that by the time we’re celebrating our 100th anniversary, in 2025, it could be a lonely celebration. Baptisms will be down to zero; professions of faith – zero; Sunday school membership – zero. Not everybody is happy with David for pointing this out. But to me,

it's an evolutionary wake-up call. Adapt or go the way of the Carrier pigeon.

Bad analogy. The Carrier pigeon went extinct as a result of human activity, and through no fault of its own. They came up against a life condition they couldn't adapt to – the presence of humans who had become a super-species. Not just one species among many others, humans have gained the power to permanently alter the conditions of life on the planet, for good or ill. In us, natural selection has become *actual* selection. We get to *choose* our future. We can make conscious adaptations that serve, not only our species, but are mutually enhancing of all life forms on earth. We are being challenged right now, as a church, and as a species to develop a complex enough intelligence to be able to serve the interests of all other species, while simultaneously serving our own. Fortunately, we have models. As my friend and colleague, Marilyn Hamilton points out in her new book, *Integral City*, honeybees produce on average 40 pounds of honey per hive every year. That's what they do. In the process, they enhance the biodiversity of their bioregion, pollinating flowers as they go about their business. They give and receive from the earth and as creatures of the earth in perfect balance. It's a balance we're called to make consciously as humans.

Indeed, there is an emergence of a new consciousness happening in humans all across the planet. Some call it Integral or Vision Logic or Postmodern Wisdom. This

consciousness not only understands at an intellectual level, but also *experiences* the cosmos as an Intelligent Whole that is like a seed wanting to come to fruition in the human species – looking for fertile soil. Here's my point: either religious institutions tap into and manifest this emerging consciousness or we get left behind. This is why it is so critical that we adopt an evolutionary paradigm. To be in God is to evolve. To be in Christ is to evolve. To know the Spirit is to evolve. (Now, if all this growth and evolution is beginning to feel exhausting, I assure you that there is also a Timeless Resting in God that is the other side of the evolutionary path. This is the path that Eckhardt Tolle has popularized, but which has been in the Christian tradition for 2000 years.)

I realize for some Christians this idea that the church can actually die if we don't evolve borders on heresy. God's in charge, they protest! All we need to do is to believe and trust that God will act – and act independent from us if need be – to save us. But in evolutionary Christianity, God acts through the processes of history as the non-coercive or most positively stated, the persuasive presence, of love. In the human realm this requires what I call *conscious consent* to allow this presence to move through us. Mary, mother of Jesus, and Jesus himself are two of our primary models of what can happen when we say “yes” to this evolutionary Spirit of God. In other words, spiritually speaking, we need to both listen for the invitation to be a vessel of Spirit, consent to the invitation, and

then express our “yes” in our own distinctive and unique ways as followers of the Christ. Without this yes to the evolutionary Spirit of the living Christ, the church will die.

So, what might happen if we interpreted Scripture through an evolutionary lens? Let’s look at today’s reading from Acts: The early Christians, Jews who believed that Jesus was the anointed one of God, are amazed that when Peter preaches, the Holy Spirit is falls upon Gentiles! They thought the Spirit was reserved exclusively for Jews:

“The Jews who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even* on the Gentiles...”(10:43). What this story is witnessing to is the evolution of religious consciousness from an ethnocentric stage of development (God is for my tribe, my family, my nation, my religion, but not yours) – to a worldcentric state, in which it’s about all of *us*, not just us. The reception of the Holy Spirit is associated directly with the expansion of a worldview that transcends, yet include, a previous worldview. The Holy Spirit is an agent of evolution in this text. This was written in a premodern era, so nobody is going to be talking about the evolution of worldviews. But in this passage, and indeed in many other passages in Scripture, there is an implicit evolutionary intuition.

In fact, since adopting this evolutionary paradigm, I have been absolutely fascinated at what happens

when one reads the Bible through an evolutionary lens. The best stuff, the loftiest sentiments, the diamonds of Scripture reflect an evolutionary intuition. If I write another book, it will include a lexicon of representative Scripture from various levels of consciousness or worldviews. Perhaps Paul’s love letter in Corinthian’s is the most explicit: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became an adult I put away childish things... For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully...” (1 Corinthians 13).

After 13 years we’re going through another evolutionary shift as a congregation. This is normal. This is what the universe does. This is the nature of Spirit. This is a sign that the risen Christ is alive and well in a culture. What’s going to be interesting is that as we consciously adopt an evolutionary model as our very purpose, we may discover that it all begins to accelerate. My wife doesn’t want to hear this. (And besides, one of our new core values is *spiritual sustainability*!) But I’m excited about the possibilities of acting as an experimental lab for the church of the future. How will an explicit evolutionary spirituality impact how we govern ourselves, how we communicate with each other, the spiritual practices we actually practice, the way we worship, the music we sing together, the mission we do together? We will, of course, carry forward the best of what we are already doing. That’s what beautiful about evolution. It’s not “out with the old and in with

the new, it's: "What new thing, by the grace of God, is emerging from the old? "Behold", says God, "I'm doing a new thing. It is springing forth. Do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah)

As you come to the table this morning, imagine yourself tapping into the living presence of the Christ, calling you from your future potential, from *our* future potential, to allow the evolutionary presence of Spirit to show us our next best step forward.