

Excerpt from interview with Ilia Delio, OSF

*'Seeing Christianity as a Religion of Evolution & Implications for Religious Life'*

LCWR Occasional Papers —Summer 2012

Recently, a religious community asked me to talk with them about dying because membership is declining and aging. Members are saying, "Okay, we have lived all these years and now we are dying, and how do we make sense of it all?" We need to look at death within the context of an evolutionary universe, where life evolves through death and resurrection. One can look at a dying community in two ways. Yes, you are dying out historically and whatever work you have done will live on in someone else. Or, you can look at dying as a participation in this unfolding evolutionary story and see that your life and your works have always been part of a larger whole. The fact is, every aspect of life has moments of death and resurrection. We are dying all along the way. But in a participatory universe, every death is the beginning of new life; every end is a new arrival. **A community may be dying but something new is being born. We need to shift our focus to the new births that are taking place in quiet, hidden, and, perhaps, non-traditional ways. So even though a community may be dying here in the now, it has contributed energy and consciousness and a spirit of life that is being taken up and used to birth a new future. Death is not an end if we believe in the resurrection; it is participation in something larger than ourselves. We can get weighed down by what seems to be aging and dying but I am encouraging us to stretch our vision because we are living in an expanding universe—and it is quite exciting.**

**Q** *LCWR has been engaged in a contemplative process that calls its members to be alert to "the new" that is emerging in the universe, the planet, the church, and religious life. The conference members are also challenging themselves to stay open to perceiving the realities of the world today in new ways. You have noted that the key to the evolution is openness to being influenced by the environment. What are some of the new influences that you would encourage women religious and particularly LCWR to explore?*

**We have two ways of looking at things -- as closed systems or as open systems.** We can look at our lives and say, "Our foundress started this community in the late 19th century and a lot of women joined. We all contributed our lives and worked wholeheartedly, and now we are all elderly, no one is entering, and we seem to be dying out." That's a closed system because we have a box into which we put all our energy and the box has now used up all its energy and nothing new can happen. An open system, on the other hand, is open into the environment. It never really has an equilibrium point or reaches a point of perfect balance; in fact, chaos is its saving grace. In an open system, something new can happen. Its **openness to the environment means that the system responds to changes in the environment by reorganizing itself. An open system has the capacity for newness**, that is, for new basins of attraction to arise within the system and pull it, over time, in a new pattern of life. Chaos theory means that new order can arise out of what seems to be disorder because the system exists far from equilibrium, is open to environmental influences, and can produce new patterns of behavior. Chaos is good and accounts for many of the beautiful patterns of nature such as cloud formation or leaf formation. It also means that small changes can amplify and have profound effects. Out of chaos, stars are born.

If we think of ourselves as open systems, we can view our history like this: "Our foundress began our community and it has always been a little chaotic as time unfolded, as social conditions changed, and the church changed with Vatican II. We have been attentive to the signs of the times, and now we see the needs of women in the Third World or we see that we are living in a Muslim neighborhood, or that our

pluralistic world calls us to new patterns of relationship.” In this view, we are looking at the environmental influences in which the community finds itself and, being open to the environment, the community can reorganize itself in relation to the environment in order to deepen relatedness.

**Evolution is a process of moving toward more complex life, that is, a greater degree of relatedness, more consciousness, and deeper union.** Sometimes in our closed systems we just don’t have the consciousness to see that we are being drawn to new relationships which would mean new life for us. This is where I see people getting stuck. **It is important to attend to what is happening in our midst, what are the new patterns of relationship that are drawing us to something new and deeper, that is, more love, more relatedness, more Christ-like. This is how we move from a closed system to an open system.**

I think all of culture and society is calling us today to enter into new patterns of relationship. Technology has ushered in a consciousness of globalization where we find ourselves aware of a diversity of people around the globe. What does this mean for us as Catholic Christians? John Haughey, SJ, has defined the word “catholic” as whole-maker. We are to be whole-makers in this globalized world.

So, what does this mean in terms of where we are going? The key, I believe, is a spirituality of interior freedom which enables us to let go of the past and engage the future. Together we are discerning new attractions, the Spirit of God is seeking to create anew in our lives, calling us to new relatedness and new wholeness – and these new movements will require letting go of what we have known and creating the future. The letting go does not mean forgetting the past. The past has brought us into the present moment and it is good. We cannot live in the past, however. To “let go” is “to let the dead bury their dead” and to follow Christ. It is to put new wine into new wineskins. The gospel life is about a new future in God.

Part of the difficulty is that our culture does not deal well with death. We want to avoid it, put it on hold, but every time we make choices there are deaths occurring. We may not be conscious of it. The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once said, every choice is a thousand renunciations. Francis of Assisi said “Blessed are those who endure the first death, for the second death will do them no harm.” **If we learn to die well we can embrace life more freely and fully. So we need to develop a consciousness of life that includes letting go; death – not as a finality – but as a transformative process.**

*Q You note that Karl Rahner, SJ, says God empowers creation to become more than it was. You also note that Teilhard de Chardin described God as the God of the future, the ultimate force of attraction for the universe who draws the universe toward greater intensification of complexity and new creation. Would you speak more about your understanding of the God of the future & to what it is that God is drawing us?*

On one hand, I think we need to trust God more wholeheartedly. We talk about Incarnation -- that God is one with us -- but we still live with an inherent dualism and the primacy of our attention is toward divine transcendence. If we truly believe that God has humbly bent down to enter into union with us and that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, then nothing should deter us from living freely in God. **In an evolutionary universe, nothing is complete which means God is still creating; the Spirit is creating anew and we are part of this new creation that is taking place in our midst.** Resurrection should free us to live Christianity as a religion of evolution; belief in the risen Christ empowers us to go forth unimpeded by the forces of history. We believe that death does not have the final word - that life is the final word because it is the Word of God.

**Reflection:** What insights did I receive from this article? To help focus group discussion, certain sentences have been put into bold print. Do I see any of these sentences relating to our congregation? If so, how?