

The Wonder of it All!
The Depth of Our Belonging to an Evolving World

Workshop I: BELONGING IN A SACRED WAY
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As a young woman, I attended a Catholic college, where we were required to take a number of courses in philosophy and religion. In our modern philosophy course, we talked about Descartes, the famous French philosopher and mathematician, but we were not allowed to read his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, as at that time it was on the Index of Forbidden Books. Of course, we immediately walked to the local bookstore to get a copy to see what was so dangerous about it.

Descartes' famous cogito argument "I think, therefore I am" resulted from his search for certainty. What was it that he could not doubt? His answer was that the only thing he could not doubt was his own existence, and that he was thinking, doubting, dreaming.

Descartes lived in the midst of the rise of modern science, which took a materialistic view of the universe. Many posited that our bodies were machines, which behaved according to predictable laws. For example, the heart was a pump, not the seat of our affections. There were distinct differences between mental and physical substances. According to Descartes, only our minds, which we knew directly, were immune to the mechanistic view of the universe. Thus he saved a place for God, freedom, and immortality in what was seen as an increasingly mechanistic, deterministic universe.

This dualism was very influential, and, ultimately, from my point of view, it was a dangerous concept. It left the physical world, which seemed so beautiful to me in so many ways, as dead matter that seemed disconnected from me. It was even difficult for Descartes to explain communication with other people. Are we all lost in our own minds without a way to connect? Are we that isolated? There were many things about Descartes that didn't seem right to me.

Fortunately, the next year I took a wonderful course on the theology of Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit, theologian, and paleontologist, who revolutionized my thinking. He has been a major influence on Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Matthew Fox, and others involved in the New Story movement.

As a child, Teilhard had a vision of the light of the spirit in the heart of all things, a vision which stayed with him throughout his life. As a scientist, Teilhard accepted the idea of evolution. He believed that as the universe evolved in complexity, both the inner and the outer of beings evolved. Consciousness and the physical world were both going through an evolution together.

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For Teilhard we are all interconnected...humans, animals, physical world...and God is at the center of it all. The universe is not static; it is always in the process of becoming, of being drawn forward by God.

As a priest, Teilhard longed to say Mass every day, but sometimes found himself isolated and without the bread and wine he needed. He wrote the *Mass on the World* as a way of expressing his feelings when he was in this situation.

“Since once again, Lord — though this time not in the forests of the Aisne but in the steppes of Asia — I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world....”

This restless multitude, confused or orderly, the immensity of which terrifies us; this ocean of humanity whose slow, monotonous wave-flows trouble the hearts even of those whose faith is most firm: it is to this deep that I thus desire all the fibres of my being should respond. All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase; all those that will diminish; all those too that will die: all of them, Lord, I try to gather into my arms, so as to hold them out to you in offering. This is the material of my sacrifice; the only material you desire.

Once upon a time men took into your temple the first fruits of their harvests, the flower of their flocks. But the offering you really want, the offering you mysteriously need every day to appease your hunger, to slake your thirst is nothing less than the growth of the world borne ever onwards in the stream of universal becoming.

Receive, O Lord, this all-embracing host which your whole creation, moved by your magnetism, offers you at this dawn of a new day.

As can be seen from this passage, Teilhard rejected both the dualism of spirit and matter and the dualism of a God completely separate from the universe.

Both Teilhard’s scientific work and his mysticism were controversial and there was much that could not be published in his lifetime. (He died in 1955.) He was often sent to pursue his scientific work in far off places where his thinking and writing would be out of the mainstream. His thoughts challenged the concept of original sin as well as literal interpretations of the Bible, so he was thought to be unorthodox and somewhat dangerous, though this opinion has changed in recent years.

Teilhard’s amazing gift is a new way of seeing how we are all interconnected, how we belong to God, the universe, and one another. The new cosmology he envisioned opens for us the beauty of creation, as we are drawn forward in the “stream of universal becoming.”