

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 28, 2009 at 2:41pm

The God who beckons

by Joan Chittister



(Photos by NASA)

Katie was a second-grader in one of our schools. One Friday at art class as the teacher roamed the aisles checking progress, she stopped at Katie's desk and asked, "Well, Katie, what are you drawing?"

"I am drawing a picture of God," Katie said proudly.

"Katie," the teacher answered, "you can't draw a picture of God. Nobody knows what God looks like."

Katie said, "They will when I'm finished."

We are all invited now to draw a new picture of God.

Picasso said: "God is just another artist. He made a giraffe, an elephant and a cat. He has no style. He just keeps trying new things." And Simone Weil wrote, "It is only the impossible that is possible for God. He has given over the possible to the mechanics of matter and the autonomy of his creatures."

What happens when classical spirituality meets modern science? Which of them is "right"? Are the two reconcilable? Or are they doomed to be eternal opposites?

There was a time when asking a question about the purpose of life was simpler than it is now because the answer never changed. Whatever existed and happened, we knew, was the eternal will and calculated design of the God who had made things. Our one purpose in life was to keep a set of basically intractable but ultimately fundamental rules until we had managed to negotiate this world well enough to escape it to a better one.

The process was clear. The rules were unequivocal. Life was a game played to achieve spiritual perfection, despite the fact that we came to realize as life went on that perfection essentially and continually eluded us. Worse, "God's will for us" was never totally apparent but we knew that it had something to do with ferreting out and being faithful to an eternal plan fully known only by God but incumbent upon us.

We learned that God had a particular function or role for each of us: male and female, clergy and lay, slave and free, ruler and ruled. In that schema the purpose of life was certain, however obscure the project itself. It was, in other words, a game of cosmic dice. Some people won; some people didn't. And God was in charge of it all.

Until Charles came along.

The unfolding of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the launch, ironically, of the priest Georges Lemaître's big bang theory -- you can imagine how popular that made him in the church -- changed everything. Evolution and the big bang theory may have clarified the questions of science about the origin and end of life but they continue to this day to unsettle what until now had become relatively standard, unarguable theological conclusions concerning the ways of God with the world.

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Two issues in particular challenge the commonplaces of religion and spiritual identity.

The first concerns the traditional definition of *creation*. Instead of the until now uncontested notion that every creature on earth is the unique and purposeful creation of God, it has begun to dawn, in the light of Darwin's theory of evolution, that life may well be simply an accident of organic chemistry.

After billions of years, of multiple mistakes, a cycle of chemical configurations and a series of hit-and-miss successes, life as we know it, science tells us, simply emerged. With no sense of uniqueness, no evidence of completeness, and no supernatural intervention.

As a result, life, some argue, is a self-generating fortuity, spawned by nothing, for the sake of nothing, with nowhere to go.

With an explanation like that, the whole notion of life's meaningfulness simply evaporates into the bizarrely unique chemistry that sustains it.

Thrown into orbit by a primordial blast -- who knows why -- billions of years ago, we are trapped here simply waiting for the fire in the blast to die out and the ice that follows it all to go to dust.

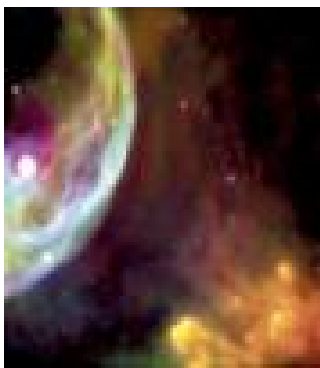
A subtler God

End of story, some say. In this model God is passé; life is purposeless. But is the tale of evolution necessarily all that bleak, all that spiritually arid, all that purposeless?

The answer, I think, does not lie in damning, rejecting or quibbling with the data of science. The answer depends on humanity's rethinking its definition of God. It depends on our ability to imagine a greater sense of self. It depends on our understanding of the ecology of life. It depends on what the metaphor of evolution itself might have to say about both the nature of God and our own possible place in an evolving universe.

Of all the statements Einstein ever made, beyond relativity, beyond the bend in space and time, it is what he said about God that may, in the end, be seen as his most profound insight of them all.

'God,' said Einstein, 'is subtle but not malicious.'



Well, perhaps ... but such subtlety and goodwill were hardly visible to the human eye, hardly arguable to those who were suffering the evil they were told was meant simply to test their fidelity or to try their character.

Such subtlety, in fact, is barely sustainable without the eye of blind faith in the light of the injustices and struggles of the real world around us.

For centuries, for instance, the struggle to define the origin of evil and the nature of God has plagued the religious community, has challenged spirituality to the limits. Few questions have done more than this one to strain the fabric of churches or the bonds between thinkers and believers, between philosophers and theologians.

In our time, with the addition of the relatively newfound scientific problem of the nature of creation itself, the very existence of religion could well seem to be in danger and a sense of spiritual purpose a thing of the past.

If life, as science says, is self-creating, what can possibly be the cosmic or overarching purpose of life? What, in fact, can be the purpose of God?

It all depends, of course, on who we say God is. A wag said: First God created humans; then humans created God. And we did. To the point that nothing we know about science now equates with what we have told ourselves about God.

As a result, science confronts the definition of God as we have framed it in the past but, in the process, ironically gives us the opportunity now to see the multiple dimensions of God that we missed.

And this great crossover point, this new Galileo moment in history, gives us a sense of purpose in life that is beyond the sanctification of the self. Indeed, this is the moment after which everything religion has said about the nature of God must somehow shift.

The God of creation, the religious world determined, was all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present and all-holy. The problem lay in the fact that a God of these proportions failed, it seemed, to exercise such power when it came to the creation this very God had created.

This God did not save the world from evil, did not exercise blatant power in behalf of the good, did not save the righteous from the unrighteous, did not act in behalf of the oppressed. This was a God whose merit theology, whose rule-driven scorekeeping, trumped care, compassion and love.

The faithful, we were taught, got the God they earned, or, conversely, lost the God they didn't, if they were unable to figure out what that God really wanted in every situation and how to pass every spiritual double-bind test.

Instead, they could, at best, only hope for eternal life and everlasting peace somewhere else. This life was out of their hands. This world was a mysterious jumble of good and evil meant to tempt and try them. This was not a subtle God; this was a God whose "will" too often looked more like malice than it did like mercy. The ways of this God with creation were straightforward and manifest. The creator God was patriarch, lawgiver and avenging judge.

Not only was this God not a "subtle" God but how could we say with certainty that this God was not a malevolent one, except that our hearts tell us that God, to be God, must be more than that.

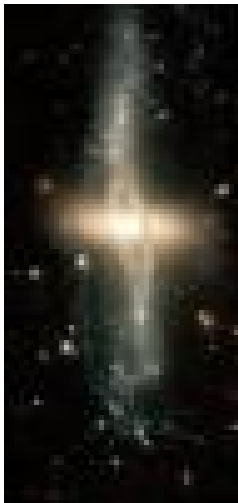
As a consequence of theology like that, we enthroned maleness. We exalted a "rationality" that was far too often deeply irrational. We created the distant and unemotional God of the Greek philosophers who affects our life at every stage and every moment since. This creator God exercised power over everything, we said. But then we got confused trying to explain that God's failure to use that power in order to save us from what endangers us.

We talked about "free will" but got tangled up again in the implications of what it means to be the weanlings of an all-knowing God. If God really knew everything before it happened, how could we possibly have free will?

We chafed under the burden of the "perfectionism" that the will of an all-perfect God must, of necessity, require of us, but of which, it was clear, we were patently incapable. The inferences of this kind of God for our own well-being were heavy indeed.

But then came Darwin and evolution and an entirely new way of seeing both creation and the world. In this world, every act of creation is not the unique act of an eternal God.

Instead, the God of creation becomes the God of *ongoing* creation, of life intent on its own development, and of life involved in contributing to its own emerging form.



From this perspective, creation, life itself, is a work in process. It grows from one stage

to another. It is immersed in both possibility and mistakes. It is a creature of imagination on the way to the unimaginable. The God of grand but hidden designs becomes the God of evolution, of the working out of creation as we go. Suddenly free will, the choices we make as we labor at the project of life, becomes important. Decision-making becomes universally significant, and selection of our actions determines the shape of an ongoing evolving world.

The humble God

A self-creating universe becomes co-creator with the humble God who shares power and waits for the best from us and provides for what we need to make it happen. We become participants in the process of life and the development of the world that is not so much planned as it is enabled. As nature grows, experiments, unfolds, selects and adapts, so then must we. Growth, not perfection, becomes the purpose of life. Ongoing creation, not predestined fate, becomes the purpose of life.

The very process of human growth, not human puppetry in the hands of a disinterested and demanding God, becomes the purpose of life. And God becomes the God of a universe on its way to growing into glory, of becoming one with its creator. Life ceases to be a program of expectations tied up in a black box, the purpose of which is to tease us into unlocking and unraveling the mystery of our lives before it gets to be too late to achieve it.

In an evolving world, then, God becomes ?becoming.? God is the one who stands by as we grow from one self to another, from one level of insight to another, from one age and awareness to another. God, we come to understand, is not the God of fixed determinations now. The past is no longer a template of forever. God becomes instead the God of the future. God, we come to see in the model that is evolutionary, is promise and possibility and forever emerging life.

The spiritual implications of a creation that goes on creating are major.

We are meant to create with the creator. We are here to discover the rest of ourselves in an equally evolving cosmos. We are not about perfection. We are about always selecting the better, about entering into the transformation of the world as it experiments with life, chooses for life, sees mistakes not as failure but as one more learning on the ladder of spiritual success.

In this world, the God of evolution becomes God the mother as well as God the father. God the mother understands pain. She bears us and then lets us grow from error to solution, from failure to success. She loves us for trying. She not only sets the standard, she helps us over the bar.

She is the rest of the image of the biblical God that Abrahamic religions have largely ignored to the peril

of true spiritual development but that the spirit knows and seeks forever. She, the biblical God, "cries out as a woman in labor" (Isaiah 42:14). She is the one whom the psalmist sees as "a nursing woman" (Psalm 131: 1-2), who in Hosea (11:3-4) is a cuddling mother who takes Israel in her arms, and who, in Proverbs as wisdom, "is there with God in the beginning" (8:22-31).

In a world in evolution is there purpose in the universe? The answer must certainly be: Never more so than now. Evolution is, in fact, a great spiritual teacher. We learn from the fossils of the ages that development is most often a slow and uncertain process, a precarious and breakneck experience that demands both time and trust in the future that is God, and in the God of the future. Evolution teaches us that movement from one stage of life to another is often both cumbersome and painful but that the pain is prelude to a better self.

We learn that failure is a necessary part of life, not its misdoing. It is simply a holy invitation to become more than we are at present. Time is grace and trying is virtue. Struggle is a sign of new life, not a condemnation of this one.

Evolution shows us that the God of becoming is a beckoning God who goes before us to invite us on, to sustain us on the way, rather than a judging God who measures us by a past we did not shape.

Now human beings can begin to revel in what is meant by growing to full stature as a responsible and participative spiritual adult whose work on the planet really, really matters. Life, suddenly, is more a blessing both to the universe and to the self than it is simply a test of a person's moral limits. To be alive, to be a person in the process of becoming, it becomes clear, is a blessing, not a bane. We are, alone and together, significant actors in the nature of life and the strengthening of the fibers of humankind.

Evolution gives us a God big enough to believe in.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a best-selling author and international lecturer on topics of justice, peace, human rights, women's issues, and contemporary spirituality in the church and in society.

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