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Evolution conference invites us all to a 'new beginning'

by Joan Chittister

From Where I Stand

The Monastics of the Desert didn't have anything to say about New Year's resolutions but they had a lot to say about life. Abba Poemen said of Abba Pior, one collection of early records report, "that every day he made a new beginning."

Monasticism, we can see, is an ancient spiritual tradition with an eye for wisdom. Obscured as this new year may be by an era of financial fear, personal pain, and the struggle to survive, this new year is also, ironically, a time crying for great creativity and change. We are in need of "a new beginning" on multiple levels.

The news media, however, long a bellwether of society's deepest concerns, has become more and more torpid by the day.

It isn't that the questions making the news aren't important ones; it's just that they're stuck, it seems, on the old ones. Partisan politics are playground stuff: real governance demands decision-making now. Women are here to stay at all levels of society -- not simply to clean the buildings they're in but to administer the programs that are housed there. Gays and lesbians are human and are finally demanding to be treated so. The birth control question has been long resolved: the pills are legal and condoms are common.

Those questions, in other words, are yesterday. They're nowhere -- even though, in some circles, the resistance to them still goes on.

It took almost a hundred years, for instance, to move beyond the structures of racism and sexism and homophobia -- long after the laws were already on the books. De facto segregation still exists in some places.

Only now, even in the United States, have women as a class begun to be really accepted as equals. ?DADT? -- the requirement that part of the population deny what they are, hide what they are, is being recognized as inhuman if not barbaric, however much the bullying that lags behind the law.

The real questions with which we must certainly grapple now, however, if we are to deal with a new future, are more cosmic in nature -- even more life changing than the continuing ripple of these old ones. These new questions are deeply spiritual ones.

What is unclear is whether or not the great churches and idea agents of the society will stop trying to reinvent the past long enough to bring us all to consider what is really facing us in the future.

The theological implications of evolution, the social and religious issues inherent in interfaith cooperation, and the kinds of personal spiritual conversion necessary if global justice and national accountability is ever to be achieved are boiling up everywhere while the world ignores them.

In the light of traditional institutional resistance in both church and state to past issues, new groups are rising everywhere to deal with the questions the old order apparently hopes simply to outlive rather than to face, to adjust to, to embrace.

One of these, the question of the relation of science to religion, for instance, has been simmering for years while churches went on using law and politics to secure old ideas and retard the development of science in the name of God.

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Advances in medicine suffered from the rejection of anatomy. Advances in society suffered from the determination by both religion and science that people of color were anatomically, psychologically and spiritually inferior to whites. Advances in humanity suffered from the notion that females were physically smaller and therefore intellectually subordinate to the males of the species.

But this is a different world now. Now the great questions of life belong to us all.

It is always possible of course, to force people to do something as long as some group has the physical power to do so. But it is not possible, even then, to force a group to believe something they know must be otherwise: like racism or sexism or the notion of a three-tiered cosmos or even the definition of life itself.

Now with the internet, no one can keep the rest of us out of the discussion. Now we can all know together what before only the educated and the elite knew. Now we can get the information we need to take our own place in the decision-making arena of the world.

No wonder the foundations of one institution after another are trembling. No wonder the definition of ?authority? is shifting. No wonder it is now small groups of ordinary people who are raising the questions outside the institutions that should be guiding the public examination and discussions of them but are not. No wonder institutions, therefore, are losing their credibility as a result.

This month, for the first time, for instance, I got an invitation to participate in a project that simply sprang up out of the heads of an evangelical minister, Michael Dowd, and his science-writer wife, Connie Barlow, that may turn out to be one of the seminal public discussions of the year -- or more.

A group of ordinary people have launched a free teleseminar series on "Evolutionary Christianity."

Their website, found here, brings together 38 scientists and religious figures of all ilk to consider the effects of evolution on religious thought and teaching, on what we have always been taught about things like the nature of God and the purpose of life.

Some of these speakers you already know, perhaps, like Matthew Fox, Diarmuid O'Murchu, Richard Rohr, Mary Southard and I. Others you may hear for the first time but will be glad you did, like John Polkinghorne, Philip Clayton, Gloria Schaab and Brian McLaren.

All you need to do to be part of a discussion like this is to sign up. It's free. It's a collection of interviews on the subject with people who take the subject seriously and, in addition, apply it to their own lives and faith for you to listen to any time you want. They ask themselves what is the place of God in an evolutionary world and, on the other hand, what is God without evolution?

These people are saying all the things we're all saying, asking all the questions we're asking ourselves. They are simply thinking it through -- like us, but out loud.

Listen in, why don't you? Eavesdrop a little. Help to bring so profound a spiritual question out of the closet. Because this is truly one of tomorrow's questions.

This one will affect all our spiritual lives -- as well as the way we shape our souls, our catechisms, our churches and our world. It's discussions like this that will make us spiritual adults.

From where I stand, evolution and its real-life implications is a very exciting, very real, very present question. It has to do with the kinds of issues that form the undercurrent of faith like "Did God really will the earthquake in Haiti?"

After all, evolution is a subject ninth grade science students already know more about than most of the adults in this world.

It may be time for the rest of us to catch up with them. That would really be a "new beginning."

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a longtime contributor to *NCR*. Her Web column, *From Where I Stand*, is found on the *NCR* Web site: NCRonline.org/blogs/from-where-i-stand.]

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