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Love and the cosmic process of evolution

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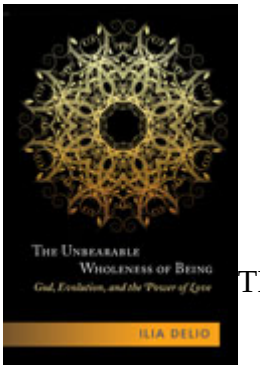

THE UNBEARABLE WHOLENESS OF BEING: GOD, EVOLUTION, AND THE POWER OF LOVE
By Ilia Delio
Published by Orbis Books, $22

This is not beach reading.

That said, this is an intellectual history of how the notions of God and creation were sundered and how, given a more expansive understanding of evolution, this inextricable unity might be re-imagined.

The title captures Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio?s fundamental insight: Given that the cosmos is not only dynamic and much older than previously thought -- some 14 billion years -- evolution has come to be understood not as some narrow theory explaining biological phenomena, but a cosmic process that challenges the plausibility of a static and unchanging notion of God and God?s relationship to all of reality.

She claims that evolution, the meta-narrative of our age, implies that all being is whole and is advancing in complexity and unity through time. This cosmic process has always been at work, is accelerating, and has implications for religious systems and for theology.

Delio?s clear intent is to show the ramifications of this meta-narrative for Christian life and the centrality of love as its driving force. Hence the title: *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love*.

The author, as a Franciscan and with doctorates in both pharmacology and theology, comes well-prepared. Delio taught at the Washington Theological Union and now directs the Catholic Studies Program at Georgetown University. She is the author of 12 books, a former Senior Fellow in Science and Religion at Georgetown?s Woodstock Theological Center, and a recipient of a Templeton Course Award in Science and Religion. Her ability to synthesize a vast scientific literature, to express those findings lucidly, and to attempt to marry them with the mystical tradition is impressive.

The Unbearable Wholeness of Being

is the third volume of a trilogy. In its first volume, *Christ in Evolution* (2008), Delio presents a Christology for the 21st century, an attempt to break through the inherited ?intellectual, abstract, and logical? understanding of Christ. *In The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (2011), which won a Catholic Press Association book award, she culls the insights of contemporary mystics in order to challenge both biblical literalists and a static Christology.

In all three volumes, she explores many of the same themes, albeit with different emphases, and appeals to the same thinkers: Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, Bede Griffiths, Thomas Merton, Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, Raimon Panikkar and, most especially, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In fact, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being* can be construed as a summary and application of Teilhard?s literary corpus of nine books and many essays and articles.

Delio begins by detailing the medieval Ptolemaic worldview with its theological and cosmological implications and then explores Copernicus? heliocentrism, which challenged existing notions of the hierarchy of being. With God no longer the source of unity, a disconnect emerged between God, the human and the cosmos. By the 18th century, the divide between science, especially cosmology, and theology widened further, relegating theology to fixed speculation and allying science with dynamic change. Evolution, at first interpreted narrowly, came to be understood as the dynamic process that generated novelty, change, complexity and convergence, a process that impelled and attracted all toward the future.

But the preoccupation of science with objectivity gave only a partial understanding of this process. What was needed was some way to capture its wholeness and explore its force of attraction, its energy. It is here that Delio borrows heavily from the mystical Teilhard, who suggested that the evolutionary process, with its orientation toward unity, complexity and consciousness, is driven by the fundamental energy of love. Delio proffers that love is the means by which global wholeness will emerge.

The implications for Christian life are many.

Both demanding and daring, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being* offered this reader an opportunity to contextualize contemporary anxieties about meaning within an expansive cosmological framework. Therefore, unlike beach reading, it inspires hope.

On a number of counts, it is a provocative contribution to the Catholic intellectual tradition. Delio clearly describes how the medieval understanding of the unity of being unraveled and the devastating consequences for intellectual life and human well-being. She ably summarizes and synthesizes the literature on evolution and its ramifications for many aspects of inquiry, and then by using the insights of Teilhard she attempts to show through contemplative understanding of the meta-narrative of evolution how the Christian might re-imagine how to live.

This appreciative response to the book does not imply that the reader is left with no questions. There is little critique of Teilhard?s thought, and the book is written for Christians, especially Catholics, and makes certain assumptions congenial to those readers. Like Teilhard, Delio asserts the *telos* of love for all creation. Yet this is a statement of religious imagination, a claim verified only by faith. It is here that the reader might want a more organic and gradual connection to be made between love and the evolutionary thrust of the cosmos.

[Dana Greene is a biographer of Evelyn Underhill, Maisie Ward and, most recently, the poet Denise Levertov. Ilia Delio is an acquaintance.]

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