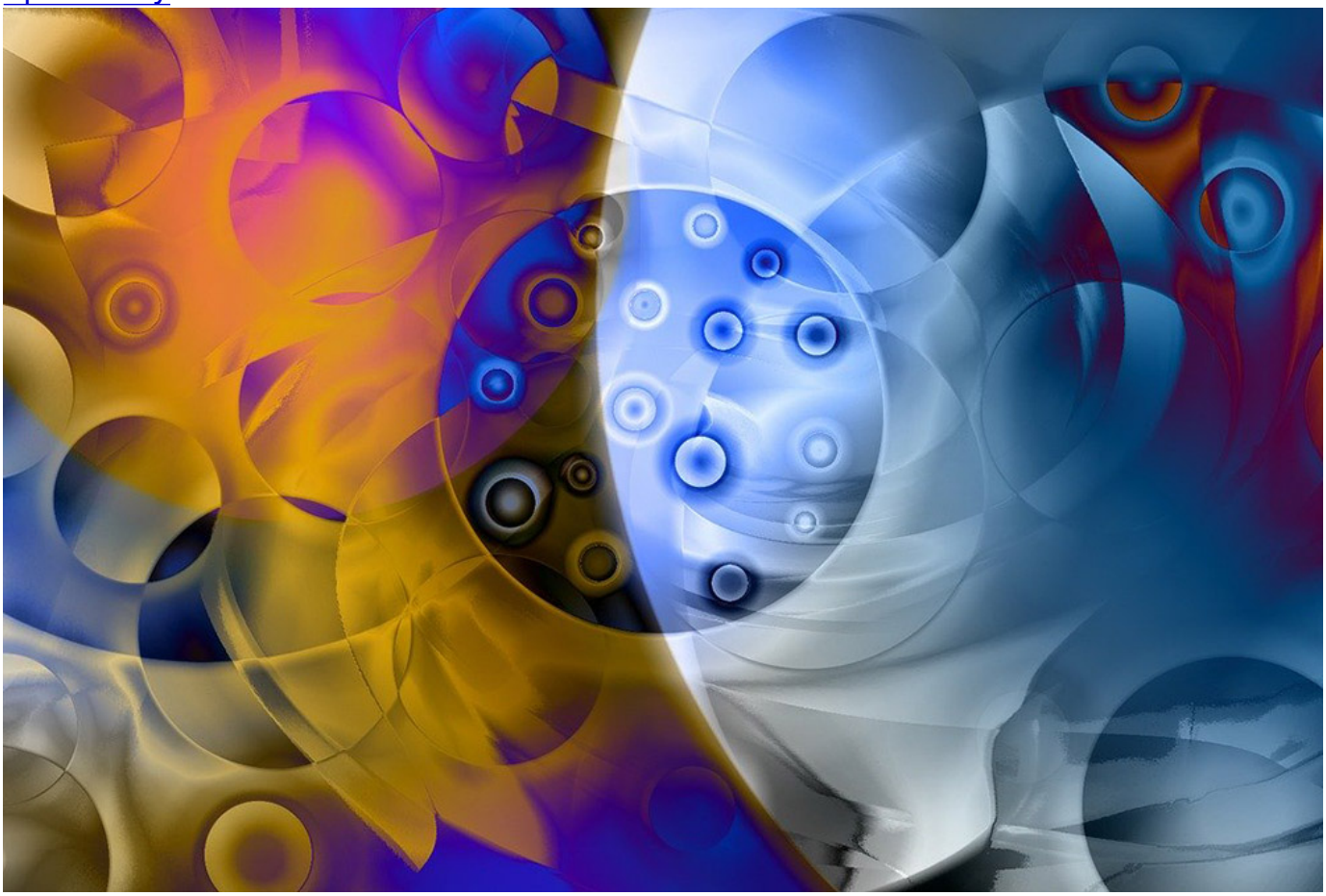
Columns
Spirituality



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by Ilia Delio

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It is almost five years since the inception of Pope Francis's encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" and, unfortunately, nothing has changed with regard to global warming. The statistics continue to show rising temperatures, and this trend is predicted to have dramatic consequences on future Earth life. Even the prophetic voice of Greta Thunberg has done little to change the state of affairs. Climate change activists continue to protest against the present policies (or lack of) but these actions too are ignored. The pope's plea and Greta's cry for a sustainable future fall on deaf ears. Statistics do not move us to change and prophets go unheard.

The church continues to issue documents on global warming, as well as immigration, economics and other current issues, but few people are reading these documents. It is sad to think that if the church died tomorrow, the world would likely express its sympathy but not attend the funeral.

In past ages, Christianity was a creative force for change; in the 12th century the Vatican was the closest thing to Silicon Valley, initiating social reforms and economic policies that shaped western Europe. Today the church has apparently lost its power to persuade. It continues to issue insightful writings, but they are dead letters falling on blind eyes and deaf ears. The glory days are past and Christians are breathing the fumes of history. In fact, much of Christianity lives on the laurels of history and nostalgia. We talk and preach as if we are still the noble center of the universe and special creatures of God, not the most recent arrival of a 13.8 billion year old universe.

The writings issued by the Vatican have a strange blend of patristic sources and medieval Thomism, with a dollop of modern science and culture. The past gives a warm fuzzy feeling of the power of God, divine providence, moral order and the beauty of wisdom. We long for what was because we can no longer make sense of what is, the present moment. Indeed the church clutches the great thinkers of the past, mostly the Greek philosophers and medieval theologians, as if thought has stopped.

God never changes, according to Teresa of Avila. How could God change with fixed and eternal truths? God has little choice but to remain unchanging. The well-worn words of Julian of Norwich inspire us to stay the course of this medieval fortress: All shall be well, she wrote. But all is not well. The church is no longer an active, vital

force in the world. A church deaf to the cries of the world, Raimundo Panikkar wrote, is unable to utter any divine Word. What is the world crying out for? A green Earth? Water justice? Immigration rights? Or is it crying out for new bodies, new brains, and new minds, all promised by the prophets of Silicon Valley?

In a provocative essay entitled "Salvation by algorithm: God, technology and the new 21st-century religions," Yuval Harari outlines the new religion of technology. Harari is an Israeli historian and professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* and *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind,* and his ideas have been widely discussed. His secularist and agnostic view shows a cursory understanding of religion and spirituality, and yet his insights are poignant.

Harari begins his essay by saying that "the most interesting place in the world from a religious perspective is not Syria or the Bible Belt, but Silicon Valley." He says that is "where hi-tech gurus are brewing for us amazing new religions that have little to do with God, and everything to do with technology. They promise all the old prizes — happiness, peace, justice and eternal life in paradise — but here on Earth with the help of technology, rather than after death and with the help of supernatural beings."

The established religions may boast of a divine mandate, he indicates, giving them a fixed essence of eternal and unchanging truth … but they "have no fixed essence. They have survived for centuries and millennia not by clinging to some eternal values, but by repeatedly pouring heady new wine into very old skins."

"Heady new wine" is a very interesting term, for it highlights a lot of Catholic doctrine and preaching; Greek terms explained in long homiletic drones. While Catholics may claim allegiance in the millions, strength is not in numbers, according to Harari, but in bold, new creative ideas. In his view the train of *Homo sapiens* is leaving the station driven by the engineers of Silicon Valley:

> "Whereas during the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century human beings learned to produce vehicles, weapons, textiles and food, in the new industrial revolution of the 21st century human beings are learning to produce themselves. The main products of the coming decades will be bodies, brains and minds."

Brett Robinson also draws a relationship between religion and technology in his book *Appletopia: Media Technology and the Religious Imagination of Steve Jobs*. The transcendent design of the Apple store, according to Robinson, fits a historical pattern wherein the dominant technology of an age acquires a sacred status. In the Middle Ages the great cathedrals were packed with people searching for an experience of transcendence; today the Apple store is packed with people looking for the same experience. Cars, like computers, were built to transport the user, he writes — one moves the body and the other moves the mind. Both machines changed our relationship to space and time.

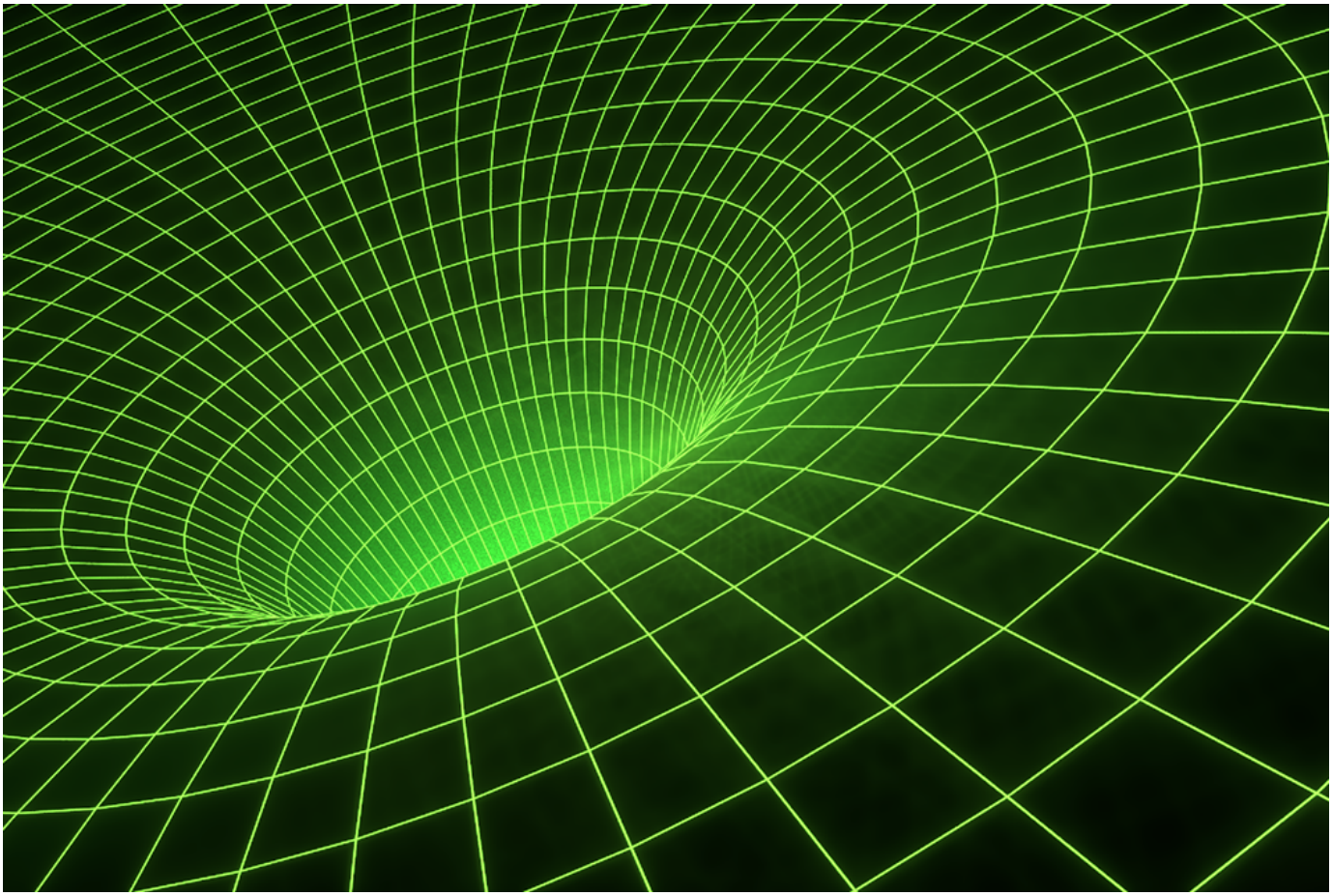
Apple devices encourage self-expression by inviting spontaneous creativity and personalization, according to Robinson. Religious communication uses metaphorical language because it proposes realities that cannot be grasped directly. The invisible workings of the metaphysical realm are understood in relation to something sensible and concrete. Religion is communicated through stories, symbols, art and analogies. The rhetoric of technology resembles religion in its need for metaphors to make the unknown sensible. Artistic engineers create easy-to-understand metaphors: folders, desktops, icons and memory to name just a few. Part of Steve Jobs' genius was finding the metaphors that resonated with the uninitiated user. In the age of screen worship, media technology has become a determinant of contemplative habits.

The advertisements for the Apple computer company are emblems of a culture that has adopted technology as a de facto religion, a religion that celebrates the cult of the individual. Media devices are the means by which we communalize our concerns and ritualize the practice of self-divinization by procuring the powers of omniscience and omnipresence granted by a global communication network. Whether or not we agree with the interpretation of technology as a new place of religion, it is worth noting why technology lures us at all. Transcendence, self-creation and connectivity are just some of the underlying dynamics of technology. With the touch of a button the physical and the metaphysical realms merge before our eyes. A god-like status is granted to those who gaze on the infinite streams of information running across their screens.

Computer technology takes its cues from nature itself. When 20th century physics exploded with a new understanding of matter and energy, the concept of the field was born. Cybernetics and information soon came to explain the complexity of dynamical systems working in tandem with the environment. In order for science to accept Einstein's theory of relativity and the discoveries that followed, old

paradigms had to be discarded or placed aside.

Science, in a sense, ditched Aristotle, Aristarchus and Copernicus, and opted for Darwin and Einstein. Newton's laws of space and time could not hold up to Einstein's equations. Matter and energy, Einstein realized, were two forms of the same stuff. Paradigms change, Thomas Kuhn wrote, when the data no longer fits the equations; Newton's world was seen in an entirely new way by Einstein, and the world itself took on a whole new meaning. Science changes because we change our perspective; we see nature in new ways. What we see is that nature is elusive, replete with mystery. Nature is not fixed and static but dynamic and unfolding, which is the essence of evolution.



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Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a scientist and a careful observer of nature. His ideas on God, spirit, matter, Christ, creation and redemption were not born in a chapel during Holy Hour or through committee meetings of highbrow specialists, arguing over whether or not the use of the word infallible should be applied to all teachings

of the church. Most of his writings are based on careful and detailed studies of physics and biology. It is not surprising that, as a scientist and a Jesuit, Teilhard would be fascinated by matter itself.

In his essay on "The Spiritual Power of Matter" Teilhard writes in a lyrical and mystical way of the power of matter in which divinity is hidden. He awakens, so to speak, to the power of matter, surrendering himself in faith "to the wind which was sweeping the universe onwards." As he begins to see matter more clearly, his mind is illumined, matter reveals itself in its truth, "the universal power which brings together and unites." Every single element of the world begins to radiate divine love shining through the everyday stuff of the world. Teilhard claims we must suffer through the harshness of matter in order to know its radiance. He writes: "Raise me up then, matter, to those heights, *through struggle and separation and death* [emphasis by the author]; raise me up until, at long last, it becomes possible for me in perfect chastity to embrace the universe." On the highest level of union, Teilhard extols matter as the "divine milieu, charged with creative power ... infused with life by the incarnate Word."

In an article on "Scientific Research as Adoration," the late Jesuit Fr. Thomas King brings together Teilhard's ideas on matter and scientific research. Teilhard came to realize the need to "wrestle with Matter" and see what it reveals, in the same way that scientific research wrestles with the world and comes to understand it in a way that someone who simply gazes on it never can. As King puts it, "Teilhard saw scientific research as essential to mysticism."

According to King, for Teilhard, "science, like the mind itself," is "a process, always probing into the unknown." Mysticism therefore is not "contemplating a truth already established"; rather "mysticism lay in the very act of discovery that create[s] a new truth." "It is in these terms," King writes, "that we must understand Teilhard's talk of loving God ... 'with every fiber of the unifying universe.' " The universe is "in process" and one realm of the unifying process is "the mind of the scientist," engaged with the unfolding of the universe itself.

"As scientists struggle to make sense of their findings," King writes, they are grasping for a new unity, new horizons of insight. "The 'fibers of the unifying universe' come together in the scientist's mind," King writes, as the mind is drawn to a power hidden in matter; for Teilhard this is "dark adoration." It is "the supreme spiritual act by which the dust-cloud of experience takes on form and is kindled at the fire of knowledge" (Teilhard, in *Activation of Energy*). Teilhard indicates that

grappling with matter leads to "troubled worship." Entering the unknown dynamics of matter disturbs the known, including prayer and worship. It is not business as usual, for new knowledge leads to new insights, which leads to new visions and understandings, and in this respect, God continues to emerge in new ways.

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For Teilhard, matter *is* the incarnating presence of divinity; God is present *in* matter and not merely *to* matter. This core belief is still foreign to Christian ears, for we pray as if God is *not* "here" but "there," in heaven, awaiting our attention: "I lift up my eyes to the mountains, from where shall come my help?" the psalmist writes (Psalms 121:1-4). In prayer we seek to "lift up" our weary spirits from the heaviness of matter, focusing our attention on God above. But the Christian God is here, in matter. Prayer is to lead us into the heart of matter.

Do we really believe that "God is present in matter"? Is matter the same as God? This would be pantheism, and while Teilhard leans in this direction, he is clear that God and matter are not equivalent. Rather, the preposition "in" is key: God is *in* matter meaning that God is the ultimate horizon, the depth and breadth of matter, other than matter (transcendent) yet intimately present to matter (immanent). When everything can be said about a particular form of matter, for example, a leaf (green, veined, and its other properties), we have not exhausted that which really draws us to it, such as its beauty or light. The ultimacy of this experience, which cannot be adequately spoken or described, is the presence of God.

So when Teilhard speaks of a power in matter, he is speaking of the ultimate power that eludes our ability to grasp or measure it. Yet it is a power that is deeply experienced and draws us into it, expressed in the many ways humans invent, create and transcend themselves. Science, technology, art, music, study, writing, all are forms of engaging this divine power in matter by which we transcend ourselves.

Unless we grapple with matter — not only in scientific research but all aspects of world-unfolding life — we are missing out on the power of life itself, the power we name as God. Twentieth century science and technology have discovered dark adoration, the unknown hidden God of matter; and because religion is so far behind in its theological doctrines, there is simply no opportunity to bring this hidden God to light. Hence it is not surprising that people spend more time on social media than in

church, or look to Google for answers to prayers. The church has its head in the sand, imploding from power struggles rooted in fourth century Roman imperialism, while Google is building a new church.

People today are searching for something to believe in, a power that vitalizes and dynamizes life. If the God of Jesus Christ "fills all things," as St. Paul writes, then God must be found in all things. Teilhard thought that the church does not present Christ as filling all things but a Christ who is more gnostic (known only by way of knowledge) or docetic (only in appearance) than incarnate. If faced with the Pauline cosmic Christ, he thought, many scientists (and engineers) would recognize this immanent power and presence as the God whom they had been finding in their work and worshipping with a "dark adoration."

However, this could only happen if the church embraces modern science and evolution as the very stuff out of which God is born. Then the unknown God would no longer be faceless, and dark adoration could become luminous, and the need to become gods or superhuman would be met in the very act of worship, the Christification of the universe. God is becoming flesh by coming to light in human consciousness and shaping the world with a new power.

The church is missing out on the most vital opportunity to reinvent itself for a world in evolution. Paradigms change because the universe is unfinished. Science and technology show us that when the level of our awareness changes, we start attracting a new reality. Can the church be part of a new reality? There will no greening of the Earth unless we are inspired to belong to the Earth and to realize the body of Christ is here, groaning aloud in the pangs of new birth (cf. Romans 8:22).

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