



A Conversation with Rev. Michael Dowd, author of

## **Thank God for Evolution!**

*How the Marriage of Science and Religion  
Will Transform Your Life and Our World*

**Doesn't Darwin's theory portray a rather cruel and pointless universe? Who wants to "thank God" for a world where 'survival of the fittest' and 'nature red in tooth and claw' are the way life works?**

First, no one actively working in the sciences today would say that something called "Darwin's theory" was their point of reference for understanding current evolutionary thought. Remember, Darwin published his theory beginning in 1858—and he kept updating it for almost two decades—that is, nearly until his death. You see, scientists ground themselves on *the authority of the present*, not the authority of the past. The scientific enterprise retains from the past only those insights and discoveries that have stood the test of time—and then it moves on.

That said, much of what Darwin proposed has indeed stood the test of time. And much, much more about *how* variation happens and what constitutes fitness have been discovered in the intervening century and a half. Today, those who continue to spout the ancient characterizations of evolution as, "survival of the fittest" and "nature red in tooth and claw" as the best shorthand descriptors of the process are invariably individuals who oppose an evolutionary worldview and thus are attempting to discredit evolution within the minds of nonscientists.

**So if 'survival of the fittest' and 'nature red in tooth and claw' are out-of-date and misleading metaphors, what shorthand descriptors do you like to use?**

Well, one of the phrases I prefer—a phrase that I have borrowed from evolutionary scientists alive today — is *'survival of those who fit best'*—that is, those who fit well with their environment, especially the other living beings with whom they associate. Of course, 'association' includes what you eat—cows eat grass, lions eat zebra, humans eat plants and often animals. But 'association' from an ecological standpoint also includes such things as, 'Who supplies the oxygen you breathe?' 'What little critters inside your gut help you digest your vegetables?' 'What living beings decompose your waste?' 'What plants and their associated bacteria are used by farmers to restore the nitrogen in harvested fields?' And, of course, 'What do *we*, in turn, do to contribute our share of support to the body of life?'

Yes, the face of Nature that we call evolution is not all pleasant from the standpoint of any particular species or individual. Predation is real; genetic defects occur naturally; and, of course, death ultimately knocks at the door of everyone. Nevertheless, I draw from my own Christian tradition to put these realities in a sacred context. What, after all, is the food web, if not a variation of 'Take, eat, this is my body, which is given for you'? When we speak of the "interdependent web of life" what we are really talking about is one big divine banquet—'holy communion' at the scale of the whole planet. And what is the core teaching of the Easter saga if not this: on the other side of every 'Good Friday' is 'Resurrection Sunday'—that is, death never has the last word, life does!

So when I use the word "evolution," I'm not meaning some outdated interpretation of how life forms have come into being. What I have in mind is the entire history of the cosmos—the 'Universe Story'—as understood by the vast majority of scientists writing in peer-reviewed journals and working in disciplines as diverse as cosmology, astrophysics, chemistry, geology, biology, primatology, genetics, anthropology, archeology, evolutionary brain science, evolutionary psychology, and so on—the whole shebang.

## **Why are you so enthusiastic, even evangelistic, about evolution?**

I see sacred views of evolution as the Good News (the ‘gospel’) of our time, personally and collectively. I thank God for the entire 14-billion-year epic of cosmic, biological, and human emergence, because an inspiring interpretation of the history of everything and everyone builds bridges, provides guidance, and restores realistic hope for individuals, for humanity, and for the body of life as a whole.

## **How do you see evolution ‘building bridges, providing guidance, and restoring realistic hope’?**

When I say that a meaningful view of evolution “*builds bridges*,” I mean that it reconciles head and heart, reason and faith. It also harmonizes a variety of religious perspectives—and these with nonreligious points of view, as well. More, it helps people not just tolerate differences, but actually value the diversity. I have found that individuals whose families suffer from internal religious discord are especially grateful to take on a sacred view of evolution—precisely because this perspective really can build bridges.

When I suggest that an inspiring evolutionary worldview “*provides guidance*,” I mean two things. First, a sacred view of evolution offers a more grounded and widely acceptable basis for ethics and moral instruction than ancient texts could ever hope to offer. This is a crucial realization. Second, a ‘holy view of deep-time’ shows how our way into the future is clear and unambiguous. Or to use religious language, it reveals how ‘God’s will’ is obvious and universal.

Finally, once we grasp that a meaningful view of cosmic history actually can build bridges and does provide important guidance, a third reason for thanking God for evolution becomes apparent: it “*restores hope*.” A sacred view of evolution restores *realistic* hope because—whatever our different *beliefs* about an afterlife or possible supernatural intervention—we can see how our way forward in *this* world becomes clear—and realistically possible.

## **How do you see evolution restoring hope?**

Religious zealotry that slides into violent action now threatens a whole new threshold of danger for the simple reason that exceedingly destructive weapons are now small enough to conceal and within the realm of possibility for motivated individuals to obtain. For this reason, *anything* that bridges faith and reason and helps reconcile opposing religious viewpoints surely restores hope. Moreover, in chaotic and uncertain times, like now, when things seem to be getting better and better, and worse and worse, faster and faster, *anything* that provides practical guidance for moving into a just and thriving future, personally and collectively, restores hope too.

On a more personal level, a sacred evolutionary worldview restores hope because it offers a deeper, truer understanding of human nature than non-evolutionary approaches possibly can. It’s no longer a mystery why we (and our loved ones) are tempted by the things that we’re tempted by, why we struggle with the things we do, and why staying in integrity for any length of time typically requires growing in humility, authenticity, responsibility, and serving a larger purpose, with the support of others. Understanding the religious implications of *evolutionary brain science* and *evolutionary psychology* is truly empowering. *Evolutionary spirituality*, which is informed by these disciplines, offers lasting freedom from troublesome habits and addictive thoughts and behaviors. And it does so not by rejecting earlier ways of speaking about ‘our inherited proclivities,’ or ‘our unchosen nature,’ (such as ‘original sin’) but by validating such traditional language and reinterpreting ancient insights in what has been, and is still being, revealed through the empirical sciences.

Understanding what I like to call ‘our brain’s creation story’ not only offers a sure path to freedom around some of our most persistent and challenging personal issues; it also clarifies why our most intimate and important relationships—with partner or spouse, parents, children, friends, work associates, and colleagues—are the way they are. And it reveals how virtually any of these can be made whole no matter what problems or difficulties may have existed in the past.

Finally, from a collective perspective, without an evolutionary worldview it is impossible to have an accurate understanding of human differences. With deep-time eyes, however, the question of how we can move into a healthy future together becomes practically a no-brainer.

**Those are bold claims. What is it about a religiously inspiring view of evolution that you believe will actually bring about the personal and societal benefits that you envision?**

Well, it's not really a matter of what I *believe* will happen. Rather, it is changes I've *actually witnessed*, that I've personally seen happen, that lead me to speak so confidently. In our five years of evangelizing this message on a full-time basis, Connie and I have addressed hundreds of audiences and tens of thousands of people across the religious and philosophical spectrum. The response we get is pretty much the same—whether we speak to Baptists or Buddhists, retirees or teens, theists or atheists. My book includes dozens of anecdotes, many of them stories of 'evolutionary epiphanies.' People from all walks of life have had profound religious experiences and awakenings as a result of seeing for themselves how a sacred view of evolution 'builds bridges, provides guidance, and restores hope'.

**Much of your book explores how a religious view of evolution does this, but could you mention just a few of the more important concepts and distinctions that you make?**

I'd be happy to. In my opinion, the single most significant insight gained from a soul-satisfying interpretation of the epic of evolution would be what I call "*the nested emergent nature of divine creativity*." What I'm pointing to with this phrase is the now widely accepted understanding that everything did not come into being all at once, but, rather, emerged over great expanses of time and in a nested fashion: subatomic particles within atoms, within molecules, within cells, within organisms, within ecosystems, and so on, like nesting dolls—each also part of larger nested realities: planets within solar systems, within galaxies, within the Universe as a whole. The truly amazing thing, which humanity only recently discovered, is that every level has the capacity to create—that is, every nested level can bring new things into existence. And we don't merely believe this is so; we know it. In many cases scientists can see it happening now and they can measure it. To cite just two of the better-known examples: Hydrogen and oxygen come into relationship and create water. Stars create within themselves most of the atoms in the periodic table of elements. So whether we look at the smallest scale or the largest, every nested level is not merely created; it is creative.

"God," from an evolutionary standpoint, is nothing so trivial as a supreme landlord residing off the planet and outside the Universe—an otherworldly entity whose primary business is engaging in unnatural (that is, supernatural) acts. As I'm using the term, "God" cannot possibly be less than a sacred, proper name for Ultimate Reality, the largest nested whole—that One Supreme Reality which transcends yet includes all other realities and makes possible all forms of creativity. And because we are part of the whole and cannot get outside the whole to examine it, different peoples at different times, living in different parts of the world, reflecting on different plants, different animals, different terrain, and different climates, would naturally and inevitably have used different metaphors and analogies to describe the nature of this Ultimacy. Naturally, they would have told different stories about how to relate meaningfully to It/Him/Her. Understanding religious differences is hardly more complicated than comprehending this fact and pondering its implications.

**What do you mean by 'the emergent nature of divine creativity' and 'the holy trajectory of evolution'? And are these two the same thing?**

Basically, yes. When I speak of *evolutionary emergence* I'm referring to the fact that 'the Universe' (Nature/Time/Reality/God) has consistently, though not without setbacks, produced larger and wider scales of cooperation and complexity over time. In the human realm, this '*holy trajectory of evolution*' has evoked broader circles of caring, compassion, and commitment as societies have become increasingly larger and more interdependent—from families and clans, to tribes, to chiefdoms and kingdoms, to theocracies and early nations, to corporate states, global markets, social democracies, and now the World Wide Web. This '*nested emergent nature of reality*' is a central unifying concept in my book.

Understanding how this process has successfully unfolded to the present—by each level discovering how to align the natural self-interest of its parts with the wellbeing of the whole they are part of—it is this trend that provides the ‘clear guidance’ I mentioned earlier. This is the guidance of how humanity must now move into the future if our species is to continue to be part of the process. Whether we use more broadly inclusive language and refer to it as following ‘the way of life’, ‘the principles of nature’, or ‘the laws of the Universe’, or whether we choose to use more traditional religious language and speak of it as ‘obedience to the will of God’, makes little difference. Our way forward is obvious. To the degree that we successfully align the natural self-interests of individuals, corporations, and nation-states with the wellbeing of the planet as a whole we will move into a sustainably lifegiving future. If we fail here, most of the other good that we do will not be enough.

From an evolutionary perspective, *nothing* is more important than putting into place laws, taxes, and moral incentives at all levels—locally, regionally, nationally, and globally—that make it easy and virtually effortless for individuals and groups to do the right, just, ecological thing, and also make it easy and effortless for them to *not* do the unjust, un-ecological thing. And the only reason it will be ‘easy and effortless’ is because it will be in their self-interest to benefit the whole (they’ll profit by doing so) and it will also be in their self-interest to not harm the whole (because they’ll be disadvantaged in some way if they do).

In addition to ‘*the nested emergent nature of reality*’ and ‘*the holy trajectory of evolution*’, I also introduce a number of other bridge-building concepts and terms that have proven ideal for finding common ground and for helping those on both sides of the science and religion debate move beyond their entrenched positions. The distinctions between ‘*private revelation*’ and ‘*public revelation*’, and between ‘*day language*’ and ‘*night language*’, have proven especially helpful in this regard. So too have the distinctions between ‘*religious believers*’ and ‘*religious knowers*’, and between ‘*flat-earth faith*’ and ‘*evolutionary faith*’. And almost everyone finds the concept of ‘*facts as God’s native tongue*’ provocative. Most find that this idea—of facts being ‘God’s native tongue’—opens up whole new ways of seeing and appreciating divine communication, though some—especially those on the more conservative end of the theological spectrum—initially resist expanding their traditional ways of thinking about ‘God’s word’.

I’m not going to elaborate on any of these ideas now, but suffice it to say here that, taken together, these understandings and distinctions are foundational for the marriage of science and religion.

### **How is the worldview you are proposing different from ‘intelligent design’?**

The main problem, as I see it, with ‘intelligent design’ (ID) is that *it trivializes God and dishonors science*. The phrase itself, ‘intelligent *design*’, presupposes a view of the world as a created object rather than as a creative reality in its own right. ID also presupposes an otherworldly designer outside the system. It’s not a surprise to me that the scientific community has so roundly rejected intelligent design as an explanation for how the world became complex. ID fails to appreciate *the revelatory nature of the worldwide, self-correcting scientific enterprise*. It also perpetuates in people’s minds a ‘God of the gaps’ view of time and space. That is, wherever there’s a gap in our understanding, that’s where God’s activity is. To my mind, this is an inconsequential and trivialized understanding of the divine. An evolutionary God is so much more real than this—indeed, undeniably real.

‘Intelligent design’ as a term first appeared in 1989, two years after the teaching of ‘biblical creationism’ in public schools was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. Its definition differs from creationism in that it is not tied to a literal interpretation of Bible. Most of the leaders in the ID movement, in fact, accept that the Universe is 14 billion years old. But unlike creationism and intelligent design—both belief-based approaches critical of mainstream science—‘*evolutionary theology*’ as a worldview and ‘*evolutionary spirituality*’ as a personal practice are *knowledge-based* approaches grounded in our best and most current scientific understandings of this evolving Cosmos.

In my opinion, the courts are right to reject the teaching of intelligent design in public schools, at least in science classes. But I predict that the perspective offered in *Thank God for Evolution!* will be embraced by public school officials and the courts alike. Having endorsements from five Noble laureates and other luminaries across the theological spectrum, including Eugenie Scott, Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education, should help. In contrast, I can’t imagine any of these science and religion leaders backing a book espousing intelligent design.

## What do you mean by ‘evolutionary spirituality’?

*Evolutionary spirituality* is not about anything ethereal. And it’s not about believing in anything, otherworldly or not. Evolutionary spirituality is about *being in right relationship with reality* at all nested levels: within yourself, with your past, present, and future relationships, with your world, and with the source, energy, and end of your existence, whatever name you may choose to give this undeniably Reality. It’s also about *leaving a positive legacy*. Fortunately, thanks to a sacred evolutionary understanding, we know, rather than merely believe, how to be in right relationship with reality. Basically, it all boils down to striving toward what I call ‘*deep integrity*’, or ‘*evolutionary integrity*’—that is, growing in trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service to the whole (i.e., God). When we grow in these four areas, our life works and our relationships work. We experience heavenly joy even in the midst of life’s inevitable challenges, and we can fulfill our evolutionary purpose—“God’s will” for our lives.

## In your book you describe how a sacred view of evolution “un-trivializes God” and “REALizes religion.” Can you say a few words about how this happens?

Certainly. That a sacred view of evolution “un-trivializes God” and that it “REALizes religion” are two of the central claims I make in *Thank God for Evolution!* Namely, I contend that an inspiring view of cosmic, biological, and human history *redeems God talk* and *REALizes religious abstractions*.

Let me explain: I maintain that non-evolutionary views of God are by their very nature unsubstantial and inconsequential. The fact that Richard Dawkins’ book, *The God Delusion*, was an instant bestseller is compelling evidence of this. No one would write a book (or at least no one would buy one) called, *The Life Delusion*, or *The Universe Delusion*. Why? Because ‘Life’ and ‘the Universe’ are not trivial concepts—they are *undeniably real*. “Do you believe in water?” is an absurd question precisely because water is real, not imaginary. The truth is that it doesn’t matter whether you ‘believe in’ water or not. The demonstrable fact is that we are each 50-70% water. Without water we wouldn’t exist, whether we believe in it or not.

An evolutionary understanding of God goes *beyond belief or nonbelief*. Who can deny that there *is* such a thing as ‘the Whole of Reality, measurable and non-measurable’ and that “God” *is* a legitimate proper name for this Ulitmacy? The transparency of this point is, I think, one of the main reasons why the ‘creatheistic’ perspective Connie and I present resonates with such a broad audience, and why, I believe, we will see an evolutionary understanding of the divine replace flat-earth understandings all over the world in the coming decades.

When I say that evolution ‘*REALizes religion*’ what I mean is that a sacred view of deep-time takes what many (religious and nonreligious alike) think of as otherworldly abstractions and shows how they can actually be experienced as *REAL*, for everybody, everywhere, at all times. Throughout *Thank God for Evolution!*, I take many of the core doctrines central to Christianity—sin, salvation, the kingdom of God, heaven and hell, Jesus as the way, truth, and life, and so on—and show how each of these can be understood in a *REALIZED*—that is, an undeniably this-world realistic—way.

Ironically, evolution gives us a more intimate and personal relationship with God because God is no longer far off, unnatural, and impotent. And it gives us a way of thinking about religion that helps us understand how and why religions are different, and how we can cooperate across ethnic and religious differences to co-create a thriving world together. Both of these are, to my mind, really Good News.

## You mentioned that audiences across the theological spectrum, including atheists, have responded favorably to your message. Is this really true? Traditional churchgoers, non-religious scientists, and young people all have the same positive reaction?

For the most part, yes, although of course there are differences. In our first five years on the road, my wife and I delivered Sunday sermons, evening programs, and multi-day workshops in more than five hundred churches, convents, monasteries, and spiritual centers across North America—including liberal and conservative Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Unitarian Universalist, Unity, Religious Science, Quaker, Mennonite, and Buddhist groups. We have also presented audience-appropriate versions of the exact same meaningful evolutionary message in nearly a hundred secular settings,

including academic science and religion conferences, colleges, universities, high schools, grade schools, nature centers, zoos, and public libraries. No matter the context—liberal, conservative, religious, non-religious—the vast majority of attendees report finding tremendous value in our programs. Many tell us that one or another of our presentations was the single most inspiring talk they’ve ever experienced. And there’s always a handful who make the effort to communicate with us later in order to tell us precisely *how* this perspective has been life changing for them.

Young people, especially, it seems, find this way of seeing moving and empowering. But you should also know that I rarely get the opportunity to speak in the most conservative of settings. I don’t get invited into the pulpit of ministers who believe that evolution is of the devil. It just doesn’t happen, at least not yet.

**You and your wife have been traveling North America for nearly six years without a home, sharing this ‘Gospel According to Evolution’ with religious and secular audiences of all ages. What’s it like to live on the road for that long?**

In a word, heavenly! We feel we’re the richest people on the planet. The fact that we don’t have any single place we call home makes it easy to experience the entire continent as home. We’ve even given North America an affectionate nickname: Nora. So in addition to having the feeling of always being on vacation yet always in the center of our bliss, passionately doing what we most love to do—widely sharing a reconciling message of realistic hope and possibility—we’re also falling ever more in love with Nora. It’s the most soul-nourishing way to live that either of us can imagine. In fact, the thought of actually settling down in one place is utterly depressing. Clearly, this is what we’re called to do.

I remember a few years ago thinking, “Why is this lifestyle so life-giving and fulfilling?” Then it hit me. Of course this way of living is deeply, even primordially, satisfying! For well over 95% of human history we didn’t live in the same place year-round; we migrated with the seasons. Our ancient ancestors would come back to a place where they hadn’t been for a year or two or three, recognize similarities and differences since the last time they’d been there, and it would feel like a homecoming, or like being reunited with a loved one. Well that’s pretty much how Connie and I feel all the time.

And then there’s this utter miracle (which still occasionally brings me to tears when I think about it): I have a wife who is also my mission partner and who not only loves me deeply and is one of the most respected writers and leaders in this movement, but she thrives on this radical and itinerant lifestyle too. I mean, there are probably not too many women who would even consider giving up their home and living permanently on the road!

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