

Chapter 7



The Great Story of Our Time: An Interview With Reverend Michael Dowd



Think science and religion are irreconcilable? Think again. The Reverend Michael Dowd is an “evolutionary evangelist” who is rapidly becoming one of the leading voices in the synthesis of science and religion in America today. Dowd is the author of the controversial best-selling book *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*, which is being praised by a host of Nobel laureates and religious leaders alike. He and his wife, noted science writer Connie Barlow, have worked for many years to promote a sacred story of the universe that brings together the wisdom, wonder, and awe of traditional religious movements with the evidence-based, collective intelligence of modern science.

Dowd graduated with top honors from Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri, where he received a BA in Biblical Studies and Philosophy. He also graduated with honors from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (now Palmer Seminary) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where he earned a Master of Divinity

degree. Rev. Dowd served as a United Church of Christ minister for nine years, pastoring churches in Massachusetts, Ohio, and Michigan. His 1991 book, *EarthSpirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity* (Twenty-Third Publications) was one of the first attempts to look appreciatively at biblical Christianity from the perspective of a modern cosmology.

In 1995 Rev. Dowd began working with Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical leaders across America on social and environmental issues, as religious organizer for the Washington D.C.–based National Environmental Trust. From 1997 to 2000 he headed the first government-funded program designed to produce large-scale voluntary citizen behavior change along stewardship lines in the United States: The Portland Sustainable Lifestyle Campaign. In 2000 and 2001 he served as campaign manager of Global Action Plan’s EcoTeam and Livable Neighborhood Programs in Rockland County, New York, working with urban communities to foster more earth-friendly lifestyles and healthier, friendlier, and safer neighborhoods.

Since April 2002, Michael and Connie have permanently traveled the continent sharing their inspiring view of evolution in churches, schools, and living rooms across North America. Their vision of a sustainable, life-giving, empowering universe that bridges longstanding divides between “my God,” “your God,” and “no God,” and between “my religion” and “your facts,” has won them many fans and supporters that include religious leaders from every denomination and some of the world’s most esteemed scientists.

Michael and I talked in their Dodge Sprinter in the parking lot of his next speaking engagement. The van, which they affectionately call “Angel,” is painted white, with the side of it prominently displaying a Jesus fish and Darwin fish kissing, with red hearts bubbling up out of their union—an apt image for the viewpoint of the topics we were soon to explore.

Stephan Martin: Many people these days are struggling to reconcile their religious beliefs with the results and methods of science, yet you’ve found a way to overcome this seeming conflict. How does your understanding of the universe bridge the faith-reason divide?

Michael Dowd: Well, it helps to start with understanding the nature of symbolic language. All words are symbols that point to something beyond what they can ever nail down in any ultimate sense. If you imagine before there was human language, we related like other animals. Prior to language, we didn't have a word for Reality, we just experienced It. We didn't even speak of "the universe" until a few hundred years ago. In fact, the Stoic Greeks referred to Reality as a whole as "Cosmos"—a proper name, an I-Thou relationship. Not *the* cosmos, but Cosmos, a living being that they were a part of. People living 10,000 years ago would have said "The Goddess," which was how most cultures then, as best we can tell, personified Ultimacy.

Now about 5,000 years ago, writing and the plow were invented. Plows require male strength, so as a result of writing and the plow the major metaphors for Ultimate Reality began to shift from feminine to masculine. Gods replace goddesses. Then, about 500 years ago, when mechanical clocks were invented, we began to use clock-like analogies, and imagined Reality (the universe) as like a giant mechanism, with God as the otherworldly clockmaker. So you can see how our words and metaphors for Ultimacy have evolved and shifted with the times.

Today, we don't merely believe, we *know* that as a whole is creative in a nested, emergent sense: subatomic particles within atoms within molecules within cells within organisms, and so on. . . . No matter what kind of religious or non-religious group I speak to, nobody debates this nested nature of creativity. God, from this perspective, or the Goddess, Allah, Great Spirit, or any other divine name, is nothing less than a sacred, proper name—a personification of that ultimate Creative Reality that includes yet transcends everything. In other words, God is the one and only Reality that is not a subset of anything larger or more comprehensive. God is a meaningful, sacred name for the largest nesting doll, to use that analogy, although you'd have to imagine the largest nesting doll being infinite in all directions to get the sense of what I'm trying to point to.

Because we humans are a subset of the whole, and can't get outside the whole to examine it, we have to use analogies and metaphors to describe the nature of Ultimacy, the nature of "The Whole." Kind of like the blind men and the elephant, however, people living in different parts of the world would have encountered aspects of reality—different plants, animals, terrain, and climate—

and thus would have naturally used different analogies and metaphors to try to describe the nature of Ultimacy.

You see, birth, life, death, the cycles and rhythms of nature, the elemental forces of the universe—these are *undeniably* real. Like it or not, we humans have always been in an inescapable relationship with a reality that we could neither fully predict nor control. And given the nature of our brains, there's one thing that people in every culture and throughout history have instinctually done: we've used metaphors and analogies to understand and relate to that which is unavoidably, undeniably real, and/or mysterious. We can't *not* do this. Consciously or unconsciously, we will *always* interpret via metaphors.

Thus, all images and concepts of God are more or less meaningful interpretations and personifications of Undeniable Reality, or Unavoidable Mystery. And it didn't take a genius to figure out that if you trust, or have faith, in what is ultimately inescapable, your life works better than if you judge or resist what is Real. This is not theological rocket science.

Whenever any story, any culture, or any scriptural passage claims "God said this..." or "God did that..." what follows is necessarily a meaningful interpretation of some individual or group's inner or outer experience. It is never a measurable fact. In other words, had CNN or ABC News been there to record the moment of divine revelation, there would have been nothing out of the ordinary (nothing miraculous) to report on the evening news—nothing other than what was coming out of someone's mouth, or pen, or whatever folks wrote with back then. If we fail to understand this, we belittle God and will surely miss what Reality is revealing today. And we mock God if we imagine that a truly divine communicator would have spoken to humanity as a whole more clearly through goat herders and fisherman in the distant past, via their dreams and intuitions, than through cumulative evidence discovered by the global community of scientists alive today. After all, if the worldwide, self-correcting scientific endeavor is anything, it is the pursuit of collective intelligence and a cultural system designed to hold people accountable for their factual statements—their truth claims.

As I discuss at length in Part II of my book *Thank God for Evolution* ("Reality is Speaking"), facts are God's native tongue. In the same way that Reality is always speaking to us individually through our feelings, circumstances, and relationships (that is, through the facts of our experience), empirical

evidence is how Reality (God) speaks to us collectively. Few things are more important, it seems to me, than appreciating this and acting on it at all levels of society; the sooner the better.

I'm still not exactly clear on how you see God relating to the universe.

The word *universe* is what I call “day language,” the language of our normal, everyday discourse. Words like *God*, *Allah*, or *Goddess* are what I refer to as “night-language,” the language of metaphors, poetry, and vibrant, meaningful images. But all these terms are pointing to the same fundamental reality: that fecund realm of Ultimate Reality and no-thing-ness (nothingness) out of which everything emerges and which sustains and holds everything together. So it's natural that different cultures would have relationalized, or personified Reality differently. That's why there are so many different stories and images of God all over the world.

For me the universe is a proper name so it's not *the* universe but Universe.

I understand that you prefer speaking of “Universe” as a proper name (with a capital U), as opposed to “the universe” (with a little u); why is that?

Yes, it's like the difference between Earth (proper name) and *the* earth. We never speak of *the* venus, *the* mars, or *the* jupiter—it's always Venus, Mars, Jupiter—proper names—indeed, mythic names! *Earth* too is a proper name. We relate to this planet differently if we think “the earth,” little “e,” and imagine that it's a bunch of resources for us to use for our benefit, than if we relate to it as Earth, or Gaia, or some other mythic, sacred name.

The question “What is Universe?” describes the known aspects of the universe, what we can measure, what we can test, what we can hypothesize about—the physical laws, the patterns that we see that have consistency and regularity, but it also includes the whole realm of what we can't measure, what we can't know for sure, because we're part of an enormous, stupendous whole.

A Christian interviewer once asked me on a talk show, "Are you saying that God is the universe? God is more than the universe!" and I said, "The Universe is more than the universe!" Stephen Hawking wrote a book called *The Universe in a Nutshell*, which is a deceptive title. Because in his own book he mentions that physicists agree that 23 percent of the universe is dark matter and 73 percent is dark energy, neither of which we know anything about. That means that everything we know about the universe is only 4 percent of what the universe actually is! I tell people that his book *The Universe in a Nutshell* sold 22 million copies in 17 languages. How many people do you think would have bought it, had he titled his book "The Four Percent of the Universe That We Know About in a Nutshell"? [laughs] Probably very few!

So in a real, scientific sense, the universe is more than the universe! That is, we use this word *universe* as a catch-all for everything, for the whole of everything, or Reality. Yet it's only a word, a term that can seduce us into thinking that nature is an *it* to be exploited for our benefit, rather than a *Thou* to be related to in a mutually enriching way.

When I say that nature is "a Thou to be related to," then the question becomes how do we relate to this measurable and nonmeasurable Reality in which we live and move and have our being? What I often remind people is to think about every meaningful relationship that they've had with anything in their life. All our meaningful relationships are with he's, she's, and living its. If we have a meaningful relationship with some non-living it, like a boat or a car, chances are we've given it a name! [laughs]

Here we're sitting having this conversation in our van, which we've named "Angel," and this little GPS system here on the dashboard is the voice of Angel. And I'm here to tell you: Angel is a trustworthy guide! [laughs]

So we've made this non-living "it" more meaningful and added more joy in our lives by naming it. People have always had a meaningful relationship with the Whole of Reality, in part because they have invariably personified or relationalized it as a Thou. This is one of the ways that we're able to bridge the science/religion divide. Those who fail to realize that God is *always* a personification of Reality, measurable and nonmeasurable, miss everything.

So in that sense, naming actually establishes the relationship and defines our role in that relationship. I see the difference between saying “*the* universe,” which tends to separate me from it, and “Universe,” proper name, which honors It as our source. To continue our dialogue about science and religion, we have this idea from science that the universe is not only more than what we can say it is, but also that it’s changing, dynamic, and evolving. You often speak about recognizing the story and message that’s embedded in and being expressed by the universe, and you sometimes call yourself an evolutionary evangelist. I wonder if you can say more about the evolutionary nature of the universe and how you see this as good news, or gospel?

Sure. It’s vitally important to understand what I call “the holy trajectory” or “sacred direction” of emergent complexity. When we *get* this, we see that the universe isn’t merely a chaotic, chance, meaningless, purposeless, directionless process. Complexity has a direction. This is not saying that some otherworldly entity or intelligence outside the system has figured it all out or is pulling strings or making it happen in any particular way.

I’m simply saying that from the perspective of now, looking back, we see greater complexity, interdependence, and cooperation emerging at larger and wider scales throughout time. Few scientists alive today would argue with this understanding of evolutionary directionality. In fact, the last major scientist who even tried to take issue with this view of emergence was Stephen Jay Gould. But since he died in 2002, many others, such as Robert Wright, John Stewart, Richard Dawkins, Sean B. Carroll, Simon Conway Morris, Stuart Kauffman, Ursula Goodenough, Terrance Deacon, and Ray Kurzweil, to name just a few, have written popular books and articles on evolutionary emergence. This way of thinking about directionality is now widely accepted.

In addition to greater complexity, interdependence, and cooperation at larger and wider scales, we also see increasing evolvability. Life keeps getting better and better at evolving. Indeed, in us, life is now learning how it has evolved for billions of years. We are in the early stages of learning how to align ourselves with this process and will, in the decades to come, begin to consciously evolve, rather than just muddle through unconsciously.

This gives me hope. I'm deeply inspired by this. It's what wakes me up each morning excited to do all I can to cocreate a just and healthy world for our planet and its diverse and wonderful species. I see this sacred evolutionary view—this “Evolution Theology” perspective—inspiring people to cooperate across ethnic and religious differences. It can also inspire people to live with greater integrity, love, compassion, and generosity. It can help us bridge our differences and know that we've got dependable guidance that isn't merely from ancient texts, but through the entire range of sciences.

Science is revelatory; it reveals divine truth. Speaking religiously, one could say that God has been revealing Himself/Herself/Itself throughout the course of history. Understanding complexity's trajectory is vitally important, because it allows us to easily discern what “God's will” is: for us collectively to grow in compassion and cooperation, to grow in integrity, and to grow in our ability to align our programs, policies, and institutions with this sacred trajectory. When this happens, the self-interests of all the parts will be aligned with the well-being of the planet as a whole. That's the key. Our top priority must be getting ever better at aligning individual self-interest and group self-interest with planetary self-interest. When this is effectively done, individuals, corporations, and nation-states that benefit the larger common good will themselves benefit. The more good that they do, the more they'll benefit. Thus, they'll be incentivized to do as much good as possible. Individuals and groups that harm the common good will be taxed, penalized, or will suffer moral strictures. In this way, it will be in all of our self-interests to do the right, just, ecological thing. And it will also be in our self-interest to *not* do the unjust or un-ecological thing. And we learn this not from ancient religious texts, but from seeing the entire history of the universe as scripture—as divine guidance.

Another inspiring and hopeful thing is realizing that seeing ourselves and our world from an evolutionary perspective provides guidance to us as individuals regarding how to live lives of joy, happiness, bliss, fulfillment, and purpose, with relationships that thrive. This is something that we now have real knowledge about—not just beliefs about. We have measurable, empirical knowledge about how to do that.

Through science?

Yes, through science! Science is just another name for our best collective intelligence. Through evolutionary psychology, evolutionary neurobiology, and an evolutionary understanding of ethics and morality, we get fabulous guidance regarding living in fruitful, productive, on-purpose ways. Why do some individuals thrive while others don't? Why do some groups cooperate really well where others fail? We now have real knowledge about all this that was simply not available to our ancestors.

Another key piece is having a shared sacred story that allows us to understand the nature of sacrifice for the common good. That's why having a story that unites us across ethnic and religious differences is so important. This is what Connie and I call the history of everyone and everything—the epic of evolution—"The Great Story."

Evolution Theology thus builds bridges, provides guidance, and restores realistic hope. It bridges head and heart, science and religion, faith and reason. It also bridges different religious traditions and helps us value religious differences. It also bridges family members—it helps humanists and evangelicals in the same family, for example, to find enough common ground to have a deep and meaningful conversation and things that really matter. For many people, this was simply not possible before.

Because the facts of science aren't widely disputed, there's common ground for a conversation to take place.

Right, and now we have language that functions as conceptual common ground, such as "public and private revelation," "day and night language," "facts as God's native tongue," and "creatheism." These are perspectives that are providing enough common ground so that people from very different backgrounds can have nourishing conversations from the heart. So an evolutionary worldview builds bridges and provides guidance, both personally and collectively.

To use religious language, God's will is now obvious and universal. Obvious in the sense that it's right here in front of us and universal in the sense that

God's will for you, me, and our species is the same thing: live in deep integrity. When I say "God's will," I mean it is the *only* way that leads to a healthy future.

The third thing I would say about a sacred, science-based, deep-time perspective is that it restores realistic hope. I don't mean otherworldly hope, like Jesus the cosmic janitor coming to clean up the mess we've made, but a real, natural, this-world hope that is respectful of the traditional religious orientations and can ultimately usher them into a larger perspective.

For example, one of the things about a deep-time view of reality that gives me hope is the fact that the main thing that has driven creativity and transformation for billions of years has been chaos, breakdowns, and bad news. When I trust this process in my own life and in the world, I'm inspired to be in action without fear.

Such an understanding gives me the larger perspective to trust the chaos of my life, the challenges that I must deal with, and it also allows me to trust the turbulent transitions that we as a species are likely to experience in the next hundred years or so. When we look to the looming issues facing us: overpopulation, species extinction, global warming, the growing gap between the rich and the poor—many people feel overwhelmed. When I look at these things, through sacred deep-time eyes, I get excited. Because if we didn't have problems at this scale—problems that are undeniably and indisputably in need of our attention—we'd keep pushing off the changes that we need to make for another several hundred years.

Two hundred years from now people will look back at the difficult challenges that we and our children faced and they'll say, "Thank God they had to deal with those challenges!" because that's what will have forced us to evolve in healthy ways.

Yes, we made the choices we did in response to the difficulties we are now facing. It seems like another area where the Great Story provides guidance is looking through the whole history of the universe and seeing how these challenges have been overcome in the past. We're here because of all the obstacles that all the previous organisms had to overcome.

Precisely. And this is where an evolutionary perspective can become both personally and relationally transformative. When we understand our brain's creation story, for example—that is, how the brain with its embedded instincts evolved—we realize that practically all the things that we find frustrating about ourselves and each other served the survival and reproductive needs of our ancestors. In other words, we wouldn't be here without those very same traits in our lineage! For example, we all have our Lizard Legacy (our reptilian brain), our Furry li'l Mammal (our old mammalian brain), our Monkey Mind (the rational/verbal part of our brain), and our prefrontal lobes, what Connie and I playfully call our “Higher Porpoise”—the part of our brain concerned with goals, commitments, good judgment, and such—our higher purpose.

When we understand that traits such as self-centeredness, status-seeking, promiscuity, overeating, and craving foods that have lots of sugar, salt, or fat in them have been what's been needed in the past for us to have this conversation right now, we have access to a freedom that we've not known before.

The challenge now is that we live in a modern world that's cocreated through language, so we make promises and enter agreements, we say that we'll do this, and then our instincts lead us to do something different. When we can realize that these traits have served us in the past—when we can find gratitude for these traits—paradoxically, it makes it much easier to stay in integrity—partly because we're no longer judging ourselves for having these aspects of ourselves.

It's much easier for me to stay in integrity now that I know how my brain evolved, and understand why the challenging parts of myself, my “addictive nature” served my ancestors in the past. Understanding all this allows me not to judge myself *and* it helps me live in integrity now, partly by having a circle of support. Integrity is a team sport. Thanks to an evolutionary understanding of my instincts, I no longer find it challenging to be in integrity around things I used to struggle with. In my world, I call that “grace!”

You talk about evolutionary integrity in your book. Is this what you mean by it?

Yes, refer to it variously as “deep integrity,” “big integrity,” or “evolutionary integrity.” In a Christian context, I talk about it as Christ-like integrity, and

what I mean by this is the embodiment, the incarnation, of trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service. “Salvation” is found in a stance toward life that is open-hearted and open-handed, rather than one based on fear or arrogance. If you think you can have the peace that passes all understanding and freedom around your unchosen nature from the stance of arrogance and fear, you’re kidding yourself. Trust and humility are essential.

One is aligned with reality when one is humble and recognizes that there’s something larger than just one’s ego at work. When we come from a place of arrogance or fear, we’re often simply out of touch with reality. Not all kinds of fear, of course. I mean, if a tiger jumps out at you...

There’s an evolutionary purpose for fear.

Absolutely. Another aspect of evolutionary integrity is responsibility. If you think you can have real joy and peace and serve some larger purpose by being irresponsible and blaming someone or something outside yourself for your life being the way it is, you’re also out of touch with reality. The last aspect of deep integrity is serving some larger purpose than your own animal needs—to serve a larger whole, to be a blessing to another or to the world in some way.

These four—trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service—I see as the four essential components of deep integrity, of being aligned with Reality. In my book, I refer to this as the REALizing of traditional religious concepts—taking concepts we previously thought of as supernatural or other worldly and showing how they’re measurably real, for everybody, everywhere. The REALizing of sin and salvation, for example, is recognizing that we’re not just about a snake who tempted a woman long ago. Original sin is concerned with the fact that we all have an unchosen nature; we have inherited proclivities.

All of us have instincts that evolved in a world in which we no longer live. Our current context, for most of us, is not well-matched to our instincts. You wouldn’t expect a bear or a crocodile or a skunk to go counter to its instincts very easily. Yet we are expected to go counter to our instincts all the time. I mean, as a high-testosterone male, my instincts are to mate it if it moves! [laughs] Yet if I act on my instincts, I destroy my marriage, I destroy my mission. My life goes down the tubes. So the question becomes: how can our

instincts, our energies, our deep yearnings serve what is most important to us and what we're most committed to? That's what being in integrity is. To use religious language, that's what being "in Christ" is all about. And from a non-religious perspective, that's what it means to be aligned with Reality.

One could also say that following your instincts is going the way of evolution. I mean, why not give in to those impulses? It sounds like there's another instinct you're talking about, a higher instinct.

Well there is, and one of the things we've seen throughout cultural history and cultural evolution is that we keep finding ways of cooperating that supersede the needs and wants of any one individual. We've created larger scales of cooperation through beliefs, through moral codes, and through scripture, sacred stories, laws, constitutions, and so forth. If we are to move into a just, healthy, sustainable, life-giving future, then we have to recognize *how* life has created these greater spheres of complexity throughout time. We need to find ways to align our laws, our medicine, our politics, our economics, and our education with the way life really works, so that we can move into the future in a healthy way. To the degree that we ignore this direction of life, or think that our role is to dominate or oppress or use nature only for human benefit, then we're out of touch with Reality, and will suffer the consequences—and bring about a very real hell.

What do you see as the future for twenty-first century spirituality and its relationship to science? What's the direction these two fields are going?

Well, for me spirituality is not anything ethereal or other worldly. It's about right relationships with, and at, all nested levels, temporally and spatially. The opposite of spirituality would be wrong relationship, at some nested level. It's pursuing one's own self-interest at the expense of the larger or smaller spheres of our existence.

The main thing I see happening throughout the course of the next hundred years is that we will become ever more conscious of the process of evolution, as well as the necessity of aligning everything that we do with the process of evolution within and around us. And we will find ways of reorganizing our

governmental and economic structures so that it is in the self-interest of individuals, corporations, and nations to do well for the larger common good.

It's also important (and exhilarating) to recognize that we really can have freedom around our unchosen nature. Once we know this, we can allow those energies to serve us and our loved ones, and our world, in profound ways.

Maybe we can even honor them as part of our evolutionary heritage, so that they can express themselves in healthy ways.

Yes, absolutely! That's exactly what I'm talking about. For many years, Alison, my first wife, and I, and our kids, celebrated every full and new moon with treats. I would only allow myself alcohol only on the full and new moons and the kids would only allow themselves chocolate or candy or whatever. We did this for seven or eight years in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What we were doing was honoring that part our instincts and nature to have feel-good substances that kick off the dopamine in our heads, while keeping it from getting out of hand. As we all know, it's easy to get addicted to those things. But of course, it doesn't have to be an either-or relationship, where we either binge or we have to stay away from them altogether.

Now, for myself, throughout the last decade and a half I've come to a different place. For me, now, having even a little bit of alcohol in my life is not what I want, because it simply takes too much energy to keep it to just a little. So from a purely pragmatic standpoint, I now avoid alcohol entirely. But I still occasionally do chocolate or caffeine in a ritualistic way.

It sounds as though you've brought yourself in right relationship with yourself, and also with life itself. You love your life as a result, and that's really a living testament to aligning yourself with reality in this way.

Yes, it is stunning to me to be in the place where I know I could die tonight and I have no unfinished business, no resentments, and no secrets. When I look to the past, I've cleaned up all the messes and I've apologized to all the people I've hurt (at least those I could remember and track down). When I look to the future, I have no fear—I have nothing but trust and faith. When I

look to the present moment, I'm happy virtually all the time. I have heavenly joy—the peace that passes all understanding—every day. I'm with a marriage partner who is stunningly perfect for me, truly, in every way. By grace, I've gotten to the place of having no fear, no resentments, no regrets, no shame or guilt, and no unfinished business. All the people in my life whom I love know it. I've recently told them so. I personally don't know any more joyful place to be than this state of mind. And it has everything to do with having wholeheartedly embraced a sacred evolutionary perspective.

It sounds as though your life is one big celebration. Do you have any last thoughts to share on the blessings of evolution?

Everybody doesn't have to "get it," everybody doesn't have to evolve, everybody doesn't have to become like some enlightened guru or something. It takes just a few of us to change the system, and the fact that we're all different from each other is a good thing. The fact that we all have different strengths and weaknesses is a good thing, from an evolutionary perspective. It's kind of like a bioregion—the biodiversity is what makes it a healthy bioregion, and the same is true of consciousness. The key is finding people whose gifts and limitations are a good match for yours. I'm just eternally grateful to be alive today, doing this work, with Connie as my partner.

