

Let's Stop Trivializing God, The Universe, and Our Role in Evolution!

Evolutionary Evangelist Preaches Reconciliation Between Science and Religion

SEATTLE, WA. September 30, 2005 — The evolution vs. "intelligent design" debate currently raging across the United States is just the beginning, just the tip of the iceberg, judging by the attention a self-styled "America's evolutionary evangelist" is generating. Rev. Michael Dowd travels North America preaching a gospel that is billions of years old.

For the past three and a half years, Dowd has lived on the road with his wife, acclaimed science writer Connie Barlow, offering programs on what they call "the marriage of science and religion for personal and planetary wellbeing." Their work takes them to liberal and conservative religious and educational settings across the continent. Rev. Dowd has spoken to hundreds of groups and tens of thousands of people of all ages, sharing what he says is "a message of realistic hope and inspiration, grounded in reason, inspired by trust."

"We are in the early stages of one of the greatest and most far-reaching transformations in human consciousness ever," claims Dowd. "What most people do not yet realize is how the present conflict between science and religion will stimulate both to mature in healthy ways. Neither will drive the other into extinction and both will evolve considerably."

"Very quickly," Dowd says, "well within the first half of this century, we will all – believers and atheists alike – come to appreciate *how evolution is a gift to religion, and how meaning-making is a gift to science.*"

He believes that in the classroom, where science is learned, a whole new era of excitement will dawn as students are taught that the discoveries of science raise the same deep questions that have stimulated philosophers, mystics, and saints for millennia — and that a rich diversity of interpretations is available.

"As religious traditions come to embrace the science-based history of cosmos, Earth, life, and humanity in sacred ways," says Dowd, "each tradition's own unique insights will be seen in larger, more meaningful, more realistic ways than ever before. And we will find common ground that today seems nearly inconceivable.

"One can begin to sense the immensity of this coming transformation," Dowd suggests, "by reflecting on how a sacred understanding of natural history can provide ways of thinking and talking about Ultimate Reality, or God, that religious believers and scientific skeptics can both celebrate."

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Michael Dowd

September 30, 2005

<http://www.thegreatstory.org/trivializing.pdf>

Do you believe in life?

Well, do you?

This is an absurd question, yes? Of course! It doesn't matter whether we "believe in" life or not. Life is all around us, and in us. We're part of it. Life *is*, period. What anyone *says* about life, however, is another story, and worthy of belief or disbelief. If I say, "Life is wonderful," or "Life is a jungle," or "Life is unimportant; it's what happens after death that really matters," you may or may not believe me, depending on your own experience and worldview. What we say *about* life — its nature, its essence, its purposes, its patterns, its meaning — along with the metaphors and analogies we choose to describe it, is wide open for discussion and debate. But the reality of life is indisputable.

This is exactly the way that God can be understood, and *is* understood by many, from the perspective of the Great Story; that is, when human, Earth, and cosmic history are seen as an inspiring, sacred narrative. This way of thinking about deep time, the divine, and the emergent complexity of life offers a refreshingly intimate, scientifically compelling, and theologically inspiring vision of God that can serve as common ground for skeptics and religious believers of all kinds.

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Ever since human beings began telling stories about life's big questions — Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? How does one live an honorable life? — we have used analogies and metaphors based on our experience to describe the nature of reality. Some cultures looked up, out, and around, and (given their experience) proclaimed, "Mother." Other cultures did the same and said, "Father." Both are true. That is, both are accurate, albeit metaphorical reflections of the way reality is actually experienced in different parts of the world, by different peoples. The simple yet rarely appreciated fact is that every religion makes sense given the bioregion in which it emerged and the plants, animals, terrain, and climate its early believers reflected upon. A religious concept such as "the lamb of God" could only emerge in a culture familiar with sheep.

The varied ways by which earlier societies referred to reality or spoke about the divine, however, is not central to my point. Rather, I suggest that for peoples alive today, any understanding of "God" that does not *at least* mean "Ultimate Reality" or "the Whole of Reality" (measurable and non-measurable) is a trivialized, impotent, and inconsequential notion of the divine.

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One of the most significant scientific discoveries (revelations) of the last few hundred years, and something that could not have been known (revealed) prior to telescopes, microscopes, and computers, is that reality as a whole is creative in a nested directional sense. Subatomic particles reside within atoms, which comprise molecules, cells, organisms, and societies, like nested dolls of increasing size and complexity. Outward, we find planets within star systems, within galaxies, within superclusters of galaxies. And at every level, each whole/part (“holon”) expresses its own unique form of creativity (the power to bring into existence): Stars create most of the atoms in the periodic table of elements. Atoms of hydrogen and atoms of oxygen, when bonded in partnership, create water. The Sun and Earth together create fishes and forests, dragonflies and dancers. Human cultures create art, music, religious theologies, and scientific theories.

Reality understood as “nestedly creative” is *not* a belief. It is an empirical fact accepted by virtually everyone, religious conservatives and atheists alike. “God,” from this perspective, can be seen as a legitimate proper name for the largest “nesting doll”: the only Reality not a subset of some larger reality — that which sources and infuses everything, yet is also co-emergent with and indistinguishable from everything and anything.

There are, of course, innumerable other ways one can speak about Ultimate Reality and/or theologize about God. But if “God” is not a rightful proper name for “that Reality which transcends and includes all other realities,” then what is?

This way of thinking sheds new light on traditional religious understandings of “God’s immanence and transcendence.” As the largest “nesting doll,” God — that is, Reality as a Whole, measurable and non-measurable — embraces, includes, and is revealed throughout the entire Cosmos and in all of life (is immanent and omnipresent). God is the great “I Am” of existence. Yet as the source and end of everything (as *Ultimate* Reality surely must be), God is also more than the material world (Reality transcends the physical).

This understanding of the divine makes questions like, “Do you believe in God?” moot. Any “God” that can be believed in or not is a trivialized notion of the divine, and certainly *not* what I am talking about. Like life, reality simply is — no matter what beliefs one may hold. What we say *about* reality, however — the stories and beliefs we hold about its nature, purposes, direction, and so forth — is open for discussion and debate. But one can hardly deny that there *is* such a thing as “Reality as a Whole” and that “God” *is* a legitimate proper name for this Ultimacy. (The transparency of this point is surely one reason why, as I share this perspective across North America, it is readily embraced by theists, atheists, agnostics, religious non-theists, pantheists, and panentheists alike.)

Lately I’ve even been wondering if this way of thinking about God might not be the only understanding truly worthy of the name. Clearly, this “God” trumps all other gods. Whatever any person or tradition might say about the divine, the undeniable

fact is: Reality Rules! That which is fundamentally and ultimately Real *always* has the final word. Everything bows to it, with no exceptions. Traditional language declaring "God is Lord" and modern expressions like "Time will tell" point to a similar (if not identical) understanding and experience.

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Supernatural, exclusively otherworldly images and concepts of the divine notwithstanding, when "God" is understood foundationally as a sacred, proper name for "Ultimate Reality" or "the Whole of Reality, measurable and non-measurable," everything shifts: Theists, atheists, agnostics, religious non-theists, pantheists, and panentheists can stand on common ground and move beyond the quagmire of old disputes. When "God" is understood as *no less* than a sacred name for the Whole of Reality, new possibilities open for ways of thinking about creativity, intelligence, "the Universe," and our role in the evolutionary process that can go a long way toward ending the war between evolutionists and those who espouse "intelligent design."

From the perspective of the Great Story (i.e., the epic of evolution understood in a sacred, meaningful, inspiring way) "immanent creativity" may be a way of speaking about the source, nature, and process of emergent complexity that both evolutionists and proponents of intelligent design can live with. Consider: there is no inherent conflict between "immanent creativity" and a mainstream understanding of biological, cultural, planetary, and cosmic evolution. As well, the phrase "immanent creativity" doesn't imply, as "intelligent design" does, a mechanistic understanding of the Universe; "immanent creativity" does not presume that the creativity at work in the Cosmos necessarily stands outside the creation, in the way that, say, a clockmaker or engineer is quite distinct from the product each builds or invents. Although the metaphor of a mechanistic Universe helped birth the scientific revolution and served ably through the prime of the industrial revolution, scientists working today and in virtually all disciplines are moving beyond the constraints of a mechanistic worldview. Creative evolution, self-organization, autopoiesis, cosmogenesis, chaos and complexity sciences: these terms exemplify the shift from a mechanistic to a nestedly creative worldview. In the words of cultural historian Thomas Berry, "evolution is neither random nor determined, but creative."

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Scientists speak of "the Universe" (another name used by some for "reality as a whole") unfolding according to natural law and species evolving by adapting to selection pressures within the environment. Theologians speak of Creation and all living creatures as coming into being as a result of God's will and God's grace. Only now can we begin to appreciate that these are different ways of speaking about the same basic process. To argue over whether it was God, evolution, or the self-organizing dynamics of emergent complexity that brought everything into existence is like debating whether it was me, my fingers moving on the keyboard, or the electrical synapses of my nervous system that produced this sentence.

Of course, this way of understanding the divine begs the question: Does this “God” evoke humility, love, trust, adoration, reverence, or commitment? Is this a “God” anyone would want to worship, pray to, or devote one’s life to serving?

I offer a resounding, Yes! The reasons unfold below.

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If we wish to have a meaningful relationship with the *Whole* of Reality (both that which can be seen and measured and that which cannot), it is natural to use personal analogies to describe the nature of this Ultimacy. Different traditions, necessarily, use different images and metaphors to describe the nature of “Ultimate Reality” and our relationship with Him/Her/It. All such attempts to capture the essence of the Whole are legitimate. Most are helpful, and *all* are limited. Such are the deficiencies of human language and human experience.

Spiritual practices that have served many and have stood the test of time, as well as contemporary psychological research, have this in common: They suggest, at their core, that the path to wholeness and a right relationship to reality is not complicated. The peace that passes all understanding, recovery from addiction, salvation from sin, ongoing transformation, personal empowerment, enlightenment, dwelling in the kingdom of heaven, experiencing oneness with God — each of these can be found right here, now (and nowhere else!). How? Simply, *get* that you are part of the Whole, live with integrity, express your creativity, take responsibility for your life and your evolutionary legacy, listen from your heart to discern guidance from the source of your existence (whatever you may choose to call It/Him/Her), and love the Whole of Reality with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

Prayer, from this perspective, is truly an intimate process, and one that even an atheist might embrace, because prayer is no longer an act of petitioning a far-off Supernatural Being to miraculously intervene in the world according to my wishes or desires. With an understanding of “God” as a proper name for Reality as a Whole, prayer can be understood analogously as a cell in a body communicating (or in deep communion) with the larger body of which it is part.

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There is a profound difference between “believing in a personal God” and knowing God intimately, that is, relating to the Whole of Reality meaningfully, personally. “Believing in” God — that is, giving mental assent to the existence of a Supernatural Being — may or may not make a difference. When belief does not richly transform one’s experience, such belief becomes a booby prize. Relating to Reality personally, however — that is, knowing that you are accepted just as you are and trusting that everything real in your life can be experienced as a gift and blessing in disguise — well, this will virtually *always* transform your life.

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The meaning and purpose of a person's life (transformed or not) is how he or she contributes over time to the wellbeing of the whole. Similarly, the meaning and purpose of humanity is how we as a species contribute over time to the larger body of life. Traditionally, as in the Westminster Catechism, the issue is addressed this way: "Q: What is the chief end of man? A: To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Here is a re-statement of same, from the perspective of the Great Story: "Q: What is our evolutionary destiny? A: To honor and celebrate the Whole with conscious reflection."

When considering the role of the human in the evolutionary process, it's essential to remember that, from an evolutionary perspective, we are not so much separate creatures *on* Earth, living *in* a Universe, as we are a mode of being *of* Earth, an expression *of* the Universe. We didn't come into the world; we grew out from it, in the same way that an apple grows out of an apple tree. As physicist Brian Swimme says, "Earth, once molten rock, now sings opera." And again, "The entire story can be summarized in a single sentence... The greatest discovery of the scientific enterprise is this: You take a great cloud of hydrogen gas, leave it alone, and it becomes rosebushes, giraffes, and human beings."

When the Bible (Genesis 2:7) speaks about God forming us from the dust of the ground and breathing into us the breath of life, we can now appreciate that this is a true, albeit metaphorical (mythic), description of the same basic process, with "God" as a personification of the Creative Reality that made it happen.

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Concerning our evolutionary role, in the big picture as well as in the small and immediate, it is also important to realize that human destiny and the destiny of Earth are integrally linked. If we can know in our bones that everything that we are emerged through billions of years of evolution and that no species can live in isolation from others, then we will finally grasp that our future depends upon the planet's future no less than a child in the womb depends upon the mother. This is one of the great lessons of evolution.

The entire enterprise is integral: soil, air, water, and species. There is (and ever has been) only one grand purpose for humanity: to further evolutionary creativity in ways lifegiving for the whole. As Thomas Berry has said, "The human community and the community of life will go into the future as a single, sacred community, or we will both perish in the desert." The time is at hand *now* to become positive and conscious agents of the next stages of evolution, thereby enabling a future in which the vast diversity of life shall flourish. All other issues rest within that over-arching context, within that comprehensive understanding.

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To sum up: (1) Because the entire Universe is evolving and we're part of the process, and (2) because "God" cannot possibly be *less* than a proper name for "Reality as a Whole, measurable and non-measurable," then (to use traditional language), "knowing, loving, and serving God" really *is* our way into the future!

How does one "know, love, and serve God" in an evolutionary context?

Personally, it means establishing a habit of reverence. It also means that nothing may be more important than fulfilling your evolutionary mission. By listening, noticing what's real, both within and without, and pursuing the path where your own great joy and the world's evolutionary needs intersect, you truly glorify God; that is, you bless the whole.

Collectively, as a species, "knowing, loving, and serving God" in an evolutionary context means, at the very least, two things. First, it means discovering ever more effective ways of bringing people together (in all our glorious and frustrating diversity) to really hear and *get* each other and then to make decisions accordingly. Second, it means re-organizing ourselves globally, nationally, regionally, and locally so that there are real and effective incentives for collaborating and doing the right, just, ecological, evolutionarily beneficial thing, and equally effective disincentives against lying, cheating, dominating, polluting, or otherwise doing the wrong, unjust, or evolutionarily harmful thing. Humanity will realize its potential by evolving structures of governance at all levels that align the natural self-interest of individuals and groups with the wellbeing of the whole (the body of life of which we are part as well as the whole of humanity).

Practically, this means putting in place laws, taxes, moral incentives, and other structures of support and accountability to help ensure that individuals, nation-states, and corporations benefit when they benefit the whole and are harmed when they harm the whole (and the more harm or benefit they provide, the more they're harmed or benefit, in return). This process of aligning self-interest with the common good is the way that evolution has brought forth (the way that God has created through time) increasingly complex, interdependent systems.

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Life, as we have only recently learned, has repeatedly discovered ways to build cooperative, interdependent wholes out of formerly competitive, "selfish" parts. Cooperative groups of self-replicating molecular processes formed the first simple cells. Groups of these cells formed larger and more complex cells, and these in turn formed cooperative groups of cells that became multicellular organisms. Groups of multicellular organisms formed cooperative insect societies and human social systems.

In the human realm this process has continued and has expanded considerably over the past 100,000 years. Collaboration initially existed only with small family groups. Through time, cooperative organizations progressively expanded in scale to produce multi-family bands, then tribes, then agricultural communities, cities,

and empires, then nation-states, and now some forms of economic and social cooperation that span the globe. At each level, stories, beliefs, incentives, and structures of accountability emerged to support trust and collaboration and to protect against those things that erode trust: lying, cheating, dominating, freeloading, and so forth.

Our way into the future, individually and collectively, is to take this process to the next level, while honoring differences and nurturing the larger body of life upon which we depend for sustenance and inspiration. In so doing we will help ensure a just, healthy, beautiful, sustainably lifegiving future for all species. And if that doesn't qualify as "glorifying God," nothing does.

EXTRACTS FROM ONLINE DISCUSSIONS WITH MICHAEL DOWD
ABOUT THIS ESSAY

Q: You speak about life and human culture evolving greater complexity, cooperation, and interdependence over time. Where can I read more about this?

MD: There are three resources that I highly recommend for those wanting to learn more about modern responses to this question "Is there or is there not a direction to evolution?":

- John Stewart's book, *Evolution's Arrow: The Direction of Evolution and the Future of Humanity*

<http://www4.tpg.com.au/users/jes999>

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0646394975/qid=1125280246/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/104-1049298-3891134?v=glance&s=books

- Robert Wright's book, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*

<http://www.nonzero.org>

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0679758941/qid=1125280168/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_2_1/104-1049298-3891134?v=glance&s=books

- My wife Connie Barlow's book: *Evolution Extended: Biological Debates on the Meaning of Life*, originally published in 1995 by MIT Press and now self-published in paperback

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0262522063/qid=1128002686/sr=8-1/ref=sr_8_xs_ap_i1_xgl14/002-5719056-1413624?v=glance&s=books

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Q: It sounds like you're saying that because we are here this proves that there is a god. And it also sounds like it would happen to be the god that Christians believe in. Am I missing something?

MD: Actually, yes. I'm not meaning that at all. What I am saying is quite simple: A) There *is* such a thing as "Reality as a Whole" and B) "God" *is* a legitimate, proper name for this Reality. Any "God" that can be believed in or not believed in is exactly what I'm *not* talking about.

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Q: When you speak of the sum total of everything being God, that sounds like pantheism to me. Do you consider yourself a pantheist, a theist, an atheist, or a panentheist?

MD: All of the above *and* none of the above, simultaneously! Actually, Connie and I call ourselves "creatheists" (we coined the term). I pronounce it "cree a theist" and Connie pronounces it "cree atheist", but we mean the same thing. Essentially we are both "religious naturalists" who ground our religious/spiritual orientation in the widely accepted understanding that reality as a whole is creative in a nested emergent sense: atoms within molecules within organisms within planets within galaxies, etc, like nesting dolls, with each level or holon expressing its own unique form of creativity, and with greater complexity tending to emerge over time.

A fairly major difference between creatheism and pantheism is that creatheism acknowledges that there is a non-measurable, non-material aspect of reality that transcends everything we can possibly know, think, or experience: what David Bohm called "the Implicate Order" and others have called, variously, "the All Nourishing Abyss", "Pregnant Void", "Quantum Vacuum", "Akashic Field", or "Realm of All Possibilities", within which the Universe/Multiverse exists and which is its source.

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Q: In my opinion the ultimate question we face at this time is: "How should we live together?" And I believe this is best answered in a setting where a microcosm of the public can meet to answer that question, relying as best they can on reason and love. Do you agree?

MD: Absolutely! As I mention in my essay, I see few things as more important than discovering ever more effective ways of bringing people together to really hear and *get* each other, and then to make decisions accordingly.

Two other questions I see as equally important, however, are these: How can we further the evolutionary impulse and organize/govern ourselves as a species (globally, nationally, regionally, and locally) so that there are real and effective

incentives for individuals, corporations, and nation-states to cooperate and serve the common good (each benefits substantially by doing so), and equally effective incentives against disregarding or damaging the common good? And how can the epic of evolution be told in a mythic way, as a big picture sacred story, so that it inspires and motivates billions of human beings with different worldviews to really want, and then to successfully manifest, this vision?

These three, taken together, constitute for me “the ultimate questions we face at this time.”

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Q: My dream is to find a common denominator that can bring us together to talk about our future in ways that can help us rise above our religious differences. Is this, in part, what you’re trying to do?

MD: Yes, exactly. My hunch is that understanding God in a bridge-building, scientifically grounded, and theologically inspiring way, that makes sense to religious conservatives and liberals as well as to humanists and atheists, will go a long, long way toward realizing this dream.

Christians and Muslims make up approximately 55% of the human population, and the majority of these are conservative. If common ground between monotheistic believers, those of other traditions, and those with no religious orientation whatsoever cannot be found in the next 50 years or so, I hold little hope for us as a species. Too many things need to change at too large a scale.

I’m betting that one common denominator, perhaps the most significant of all, will be an inclusive, logically compelling, refreshingly intimate yet no less awe-inspiring understanding of God, such as I have tried to outline in my essay.

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Q: It seems to me that your approach is based upon seeing the mysteries of the world as profound and encapsulating messages about how we should live. Is this accurate?

MD: Not really. Yes, my approach includes that. But even more so, it’s based on seeing the *known* aspects of the world as profound and encapsulating messages about how we should live.

When I was in college I was taught, following the 18th century philosopher David Hume, that you can’t get an “ought” from an “is” – that is, you cannot derive a system of ethics and morality from the natural world. This may have been true in a pre-evolutionary context, which is when David Hume lived. However, with the kind of 21st century understanding of evolution and/or ethics provided by people like Sharif Abdullah, Connie Barlow, Kern Beare, Don Beck, Thomas Berry, Howard Bloom, S. E. Bromberg, Andrew Cohen, Peter Corning, Terry Deacon, Larry Edwards, Duane Elgin, Matthew Fox, John David Garcia, Russ Genet, Ursula

Goodenough, Billy Grassie, John Grim, John Haught, Francis Heylighen, Phillip Hefner, Barbara Marx Hubbard, L. Robert Keck, Albert LaChance, Ervin Laszlo, Bruce Lipton, David Loye, Miriam MacGillis, Joanna Macy, Gene Marshall, Lynn Margulis, Christian de Quincey, Ruth Rosenhek, Loyal Rue, Joyce Rupp, Peter Russell, Dorian Sagan, Elisabet Sahtouris, John Seed, Mary Southard, John Stewart, Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Ken Wilber, Edward O. Wilson, Robert Wright, and others who have contributed to a meaningful, even sacred, interpretation of the epic of evolution (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Story, <http://www.thegreatstory.org/links.html>, and <http://www.evolutionaryethics.com>), it's not at all difficult to derive a coherent system of morality from a careful reading of natural and human history. And, not surprisingly, what we find both validates earlier, traditional ethical systems while also raising the bar, by expanding our circles of care, compassion, and commitment.

How has evolution consistently produced orders of complexity, interdependence, and cooperation at wider scale and evolvability? How has it led to greater differentiation, increased subjectivity, and deeper communion with itself and its source over time? Learning these "laws of God"— what the Chinese call the Tao, or Way of Life — and applying what we learn toward the wellbeing of the entire Earth community and the further evolution of life and consciousness is good. Disregarding or violating these "laws of God" — that is, pursuing our own self-interest at the expense of the larger holons of which we are part (our familial, cultural, and natural contexts) or the smaller holons of which we are composed (our minds, bodies, organs and cells) and for which we are responsible (our children, neighborhoods, etc) — is wrong. It's not any more complicated than that.

Now that we know that "nature red in tooth and claw" and "the survival of the fittest" are woefully inadequate (though partially true) descriptions of the nature of nature over time, and now that we understand the centrality of symbiosis (mutually beneficial relationships) and how competition and cooperation drive each other to greater heights, we can begin to gain a new appreciation for how it is both possible and profitable to derive a shared ethical framework from natural history.

Q: But if we assume that *everything*, including "bad" or "evil" things, contribute to evolution, couldn't such an approach be used to justify the behavior of an Adolph Hitler just as much as the behavior of a Mahatma Gandhi?

MD: Hardly! Yes, those who seek to control via domination or oppression may try to justify their actions by appealing to evolution. This is to be expected. Certainly, many operating out of the so-called "social Darwinist" mindset of the late 19th and early 20th century attempted to do just this. But has not the consensus of human opinion over time (i.e., reality) judged these people harshly?

Q: I suppose. But what I'm trying to get at is this: If chaos and destruction play an indispensable role in the evolutionary process, as I'm sure you would agree, how can you say that those who seek to manipulate, control, oppress, or violate others, or those who knowingly pollute the air, water, and soil, or drive other species to extinction, are not furthering evolution?

MD: Great question! At a narrow conceptual level, of course, you are right. Given the fact that one of the primary drivers of evolutionary creativity and transformation has been chaos, breakdowns, and bad news, yes, I suppose you could say that those who do evil (i.e., pursue their own self-interest at the expense of the wellbeing of the larger or smaller holons of their existence) can, at least in some sense, be said to be furthering evolution. So I agree with you that there is much to be cautious about here. But there is more.

Recently, I was talking to my friend Tom Atlee about this very topic. Tom noted that, from a systemic perspective, great evil pushes established systems further out of balance, thereby increasing the chances that they will change. The Bolsheviks went off to WWI not only to recruit troops to their cause, but also to feed the internal contradictions of the Czarist government so that it would fall faster. Tom said he believes that, in this sense, the Bush administration may be the most transformational force on the planet, pushing all human and ecological systems to the breaking point, thereby virtually guaranteeing more speedy change (although of course this change can be "good" or "bad" depending on how we respond to their initiatives, so it has profound implications for our own ethical behavior).

Hiroshima, Tom went on to say, allowed us to see the horrific potential of nuclear war back when only two bombs existed in the world. It is arguable, he said, that those deaths (which were less than the deaths caused by much of our saturation conventional bombing) have played a pivotal role in our not destroying all of civilization in a nuclear holocaust now that we have the potential to do so.

Probing the patterns of evolutionary history, one of the most fascinating findings is that bad news so often catalyzes good news. (See: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/gospelevolution.html> and <http://www.thegreatstory.org/death-programs.html>). Some people may take this to mean that anyone who creates horror in the world is playing a powerful evolutionary role. Not so: purveyors of immense evil may well be playing powerful *devolutionary* roles, which manifest conditions so untenable that surges of creative betterment may well ensue. Surely, the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs (and much of Earth life) 65 million years ago was devolutionary; the resulting biological impoverishment was the gap into which poured waves of fresh creativity.

Indeed, those of us who hold a sacred evolutionary perspective recognize that we don't have to *create* evil, crisis, and tragedy in order to play a constructive evolutionary role. Our evolutionary power comes from our ability to *creatively engage with and respond* to the evil, crises, and tragedies that already exist and are increasingly emerging. Our life-affirming responses, designed to use the initiatory energies of our opponents for positive transformational ends — as Jesus, Gandhi, and Aikido masters, among others, so effectively model — exemplify the primary ethical grain of the evolutionary imperative, at least as I see it.

A functional cosmology, at its core, provides a clear and faithful guide for discerning right from wrong: what is to be pursued, what is to be avoided, and why.

Defining “good” (ethical/moral) behavior, as the Great Story does, as “that which preserves or benefits the larger and/or smaller holons of one’s existence over time,” and understanding “bad” (immoral/unethical) behavior as “that which harms or diminishes the larger and/or smaller holons of one’s existence over time” may not be a foolproof guide to knowing right from wrong, but it *is* a good start. And as we talk with one another in ever-widening circles, and really *get* each other’s perspectives, we will be guided even further.

Actions that unnecessarily harm people, other creatures, or Earth’s life support systems should never be considered “good things.” Having said this, we often *do* learn something of vital importance when things go wrong, which can often (though not always) facilitate further evolutionary emergence. Whether it’s suicide bombers, a hurricane like Katrina, or the difficulties of living in a post peak-oil world, challenges may (or may not) evoke creative evolutionary responses.

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Q: Buddhists generally do not talk about a creator-watcher-arbiter God (much less in human figure, white, male, etc.). Instead, from a Buddhist perspective the fundamental principle is the law of Dependent Origination (all phenomena originate depending on causes and conditions). Buddhist attitude to truth is open to new empirical and reasoned findings. We do not take old writings, authorities, majorities, etc. as the criteria of truth. And on Eternal Being, Buddhists consider all phenomena as impermanent because of Dependent Origination. Independent Eternal Being does not fit with an interdependent phenomenal world. So given all this, what, if anything, do you see this understanding of “God” as a proper name for “Ultimate Reality,” or “Reality as a Whole,” offering Buddhists?

MD: Well, the first thing I’d say is that it’s certainly not *necessary* to use God language when pointing to the Whole of Reality. It’s legitimate to do so, for sure. And a growing number of monotheistic believers and those who grew up in these traditions find it fruitful, empowering, and bridge building to do so. But as I say in my essay, there are innumerable ways one can think and speak about Ultimate Reality.

I’ve been invited to tell the Great Story — that is, the history of the Universe understood in a sacred, meaningful way — several times in Buddhist contexts. And on each occasion I’ve spoken about God in the ways I’ve done in this essay. Thus far, I’ve been warmly embraced and my message has been enthusiastically received.

Contemporary Buddhists are in a rather fortunate position, I think. The debate about God language and evolution is not an issue they’re dealing with, or really need to deal with, at all.

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Q: Not everyone will be moved by your reframing of God, as I'm sure you realize, either on logical grounds or because the scientific basis is not something that warms their hearts. Wouldn't you agree that many people want and need a transcendent God that has been revealed to us in a more traditional religious way?

MD: Perhaps. Time will tell, of course. But I'm betting my life that most people, including most conservatives over the coming decades, will joyfully, enthusiastically, and, for the most part, effortlessly make the shift to seeing God in this kind of a truly incarnational way. A God who is both transcendent *and* immanent (more than "the Universe" yet not less than "the Universe") — a God who has been faithfully revealing Him/Her/Itself through science for the last several hundred years — is far, far more alluring, inspiring, and empowering for most young people than a solely transcendent God who stopped revealing truth vital to human wellbeing and destiny thousands of years ago, when people thought the sun and stars revolved around us.

And my experience bears this out. I speak to several hundred people a week from all religious and philosophical backgrounds. Young people, including those who are politically and religiously conservative, have by and large responded very positively to my message.

The Rev. Michael Dowd, a veteran sustainability organizer, cosmic storyteller, and evolutionary theologian, is among the most inspiring speakers in America today. Video clips of him and his wife, popular science writer Connie Barlow, can be seen here: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/programs.html>. Michael and Connie are full-time, itinerant "evolutionary evangelists." Over the last three and a half years they have offered more than 350 programs, for all ages, in churches, colleges, and other religious and secular organizations across North America. They have two websites: <http://www.TheGreatStory.org> (which generates 120,000+ hits per month) and <http://www.EvolutionaryChristianity.org>. DVDs of Michael and Connie's most popular programs can be accessed here: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/dvd.html>. To view their itinerary, see: <http://www.TheGreatStory.org/itinerary.html>

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