

## Michael Morwood

### “Evolving Prayer and Ritual Celebrations”

Episode 13 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com

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**Michael Morwood** is one of the leading writers and teachers of the most progressive expressions of Christianity. His first book, *Tomorrow's Catholic*, was banned by the Catholic hierarchy and he was silenced, which led to his leaving the priesthood after nearly 3 decades service.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

Michael Morwood advocates a centrally important but thoroughly **naturalized** (that is, **non-supernatural**) understanding of **God, Jesus**, the **sacraments**, and **prayer**. His first book, *Tomorrow's Catholic: Understanding God and Jesus in a New Millennium*, “brings the religious stories of our tradition in line with what **Thomas Berry** and others call the new story of the Universe.” Here is a key quotation from his interview, which summarizes the core ideas that led to his silencing by the Catholic hierarchy and subsequent **resignation from the priesthood** in 1998:

There are two stories around God and around Jesus: Is God an elsewhere deity? Or is **God an everywhere presence** — that is, beyond our human images? Is Jesus primarily someone who comes down from up above us somewhere and is the unique pathway to a God who lives somewhere else? Or is **Jesus the revealer of this mystery in our midst**?

There are two stories around sacraments. Are sacraments primarily people being dependent on what I call “middle management” to access the sacred and bring them to us? Or are **sacraments about ritualizing an inner disposition**, a readiness to stand up and be counted? That’s what I think **Baptism** was in the early church. That’s what I think **Eucharist** is.

And then, two stories around prayer: Is prayer primarily about trying to contact an external deity who listens and responds? Or is **prayer more about changing us and deepening our awareness of this mystery** within us, among us — and challenging us to give witness to the way that we live?

This is one of only a handful of interviews in this series that explore in depth ways in which **core Christian doctrines** can be understood not only in a **cosmological** way congruent with what we now know of the universe but also in a **fully naturalized** way. This is also one of only

five episodes that include the recitation of **poetry** (Sanguin, Southard, Schaab, and Phillips are the others).

## **SUGGESTED AUDIENCES**

All Catholic audiences, even the most conservative, should be aware of (and thus exposed to) the ideas at the most naturalistic edge of their faith today. They should also be aware of the sometimes dire consequences for Catholic priests who espouse non-supernatural reinterpretations of core concepts and traditional doctrines and attempt to spread those views. Hence this interview is a must for all Catholics. It is also highly recommended for other denominations of Christianity that are open to hearing nonliteralistic interpretations of biblical scripture—notably, a thoroughly naturalistic, but not diminished, understanding of Jesus. Finally, for nontheists and post-Christians, this particular audio is one of the best in the series for opening possibilities for dialogue and shared understandings.

*Note:* At least 4 interviews in this series explore the consequences for pushing the bounds of theological doctrine too far beyond institutional norms: **Matthew Fox** and **Michael Morwood** were both silenced by their Catholic hierarchies and ultimately left the Catholic priesthood. Sister **Gail Worcelo**'s mission of establishing the first ecologically directed community of women religious within Catholicism was stalled when a more conservative bishop gained power in her district. Rev. **Paul Smith** and his congregation were expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention.

## **BLOG COMMENT**

### **Mary Pautz says:**

I am a great fan of *Michael Morwood*. He is a gentle giant! The interview was spectacular!

### **Mike says:**

I have recently read *Michael Moorwood's* book, *Tomorrow's Catholic*, and found this conversation to be an excellent supplement to that book. For me, evolution is a sacred history. Something that many Christians see as purely the creation of science (evolution) should be seen as a sacred history: the revelation of God throughout history and the unfolding of the divine.

The traditional story of Christianity can coexist with science, but it is time for a refresh. The meaning of prayer and the sacraments as well must evolve. I see an opportunity for Christianity to win back many of the people who found that they could no longer follow a religion that can't accept science and also to win back those who put all their faith in science only, showing them that Christ is at work here.

## KEYWORD TOPICS

The “**New Story**” (of the Universe), **Thomas Berry**, Catholicism (institutional troubles within), **God** (as an “elsewhere deity” or an “everywhere presence”?), **Jesus** (naturalized understanding of), **sacraments** (naturalized understanding of), **liturgy** (naturalized understanding of), **heresy**, **expulsion** (from institutional church), **new cosmology / epic of evolution**, **naturalizing faith**, **dualism** (in religious doctrines), **metaphor** (scripture as), **personification** (as a natural human tendency), **Eucharist** (naturalized understanding of), **Hubble space photos** (impact on faith), **universe history** (trajectory of and patterns within), **Nicene Creed** (disagreement with), **poetry** (recitations of), **children** (how to teach Universe Story to), **stardust** (where atoms came from), **stars** (as ancestors), **Big Bang** (naming of), **ecological interactions** as Holy Communion, **Richard Dawkins** (his gift as science writer), **deep-time perspective**, **Sallie McFague**, **poetry** (two short poems are recited), **wonder** (importance of seeing in nature), **Richard Dawkins** (as gifted communicator of science), “**deep-time eyes**”, **prayer** (inclusive forms of), **children** (prayers for use by)

## BIOGRAPHY

**Michael Morwood** has over 40 years experience in retreat, education, parish, and youth ministries in Australia and overseas. He is interested in helping Christians examine what they believe and why they believe it, what they imagine and why they imagine the way they do. While articulating faith in Jesus in ways that resonate with a contemporary understanding of our place in the universe, his concern also embraces the urgent need to shape an understanding of God and revelation that is not exclusive to any particular culture or religion.

Morwood was a member of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart for 38 years—29 of them in priestly ministry. He has an MA in Pastoral Ministry from Boston College. Following the banning of his book *Tomorrow’s Catholic*, and his silencing by Archbishop George Pell in Melbourne in 1998, Morwood resigned from religious life and priestly ministry.

Morwood is the author of *God Is Near: Trusting Our Faith* (Crossroads); *Tomorrow’s Catholic: Understanding God and Jesus in a New Millennium* (Twenty-Third Publications); *Is Jesus God? Finding Our Faith* (Crossroads); *Praying a New Story* (Orbis); *From Sand to Solid Ground: Questions of Faith for Modern Catholics* (Crossroads); and *Children Praying a New Story: A Resource for Parents, Grandparents and Teachers* (Kelmor Publications).

His webpage: [http://www.tcpc.org/about/bio.cfm?person\\_id=307](http://www.tcpc.org/about/bio.cfm?person_id=307)

## SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones added, at the following url: <http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/michael-morwood-for-pope/>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Naturalizing religious concepts.** Michael Morwood says that, by bringing the new story of the universe and the evolution of life into his religious understanding, it has actually made him “**spiritually more alive.**” He goes on to say that it “**makes Jesus more human, more true, more dynamic,**” and that “it makes far **more sense of prayer and sacrament** and liturgy than the old story ever did.”

The host, Michael Dowd, agrees with Michael Morwood that naturalizing Christian doctrines is a wise and inspiring turn. Dowd says that doing so leads to “a far richer, grander and more magnificent understanding.”

Halfway through the interview, Michael Morwood talks about his new understanding of **Jesus**, in both a naturalized and cosmological way. He then asks the big question:

Now, when I *do* this, do I stop being a Christian? That's the big question for many people. **Do I stop being a Christian if I go back and look at Jesus this way?** And I want to say “No, no, no!” The whole point of being Christian is to look at Jesus: How does Jesus articulate for us an understanding of our relationship with the divine? How does he challenge us to give expression to that? What is the **kingdom of God** all about? Nothing of that changes.

So I see **Jesus** more clearly than I ever saw him before, as the emergence of the divine at work in the universe. But now it's not that it's just *his* story — that he's so different from *us*. Now, I see him saying, “**This is your story.** Open your eyes. See this! See this!” The kingdom of God will be clear; justice will come again — if we see this. And it will change the world.

Michael Morwood makes many other provocative points in this interview. Notably, he says,

As I walk in this journey I'm wanting to honor the fact that **Jesus** walked and talked in a universe that was permeated with the divine presence. I think that is so important because institutional Christianity still refuses to say that. It still wants to tell the story of **dualism** — that God sent his Son from somewhere else, that Jesus is the unique savior (in the sense that Jesus opens the gates of heaven and Jesus gets us access to a place where God is, which is somewhere else). To all this, I want to say, “**No, I am not there anymore. I will not walk in that story.**” And I'm saying, “I will not walk in that story as a Christian.”

It's probably time for many Christians to be unapologetic about that. And I know in *saying* that, for example, **I'm disagreeing with some of Paul's writing. I'm disagreeing with the writer of John's Gospel. I'm disagreeing with the Nicene Creed.** People will say, “Well, how can you call yourself a Christian if you disagree with that?!” And I say, “Well, you tell me that you don't believe that Jesus walked and talked in a universe permeated with the divine presence: You tell me why you don't believe that.” I think that's a key point of discussion for Christians.

**Question 1:** *Was this interview extensive enough for you to step into Morwood's worldview and experience how **his faith has actually been enriched by a “naturalized” understanding of Christian doctrine?** If so, did you find this interview helpful for your own faith development,*

*and in what ways? Alternatively, was this interview just too challenging or too radical for you? Please elaborate.*

2. **On staying or going.** Michael Morwood, along with **Matthew Fox** in another interview, both responded to the silencing of their perspectives by leaving the Catholic priesthood — that is, leaving their careers and their communities, but not their faith.

**Question 2:** *Reflecting on your own life, **have you ever faced a choice** of leaving behind a secure position in order to live your life in accord with your values or to pursue a deep sense of calling? And to what extent do our choices close down when, unlike these two Catholic priests, we reach a point when we are no longer solo but have a family to support?*

3. **Trivializing God?** Michael Morwood characterizes the view of God that he gave up as, “an external, elsewhere reality.” He says,

One of the things that's become very clear for me—it's almost like a decision that I make as a Christian: Will I theologize, will I pray, will I conduct liturgy in a worldview that sees God (whatever God *is*, the mystery of God) primarily as **an external elsewhere reality**? Or will I do all that in a thoroughgoing Christian conviction that I stand in a universe that is totally and utterly permeated with the divine presence. I think that's a choice that you make.

I now have made the choice fairly clearly, saying: I want to walk in an understanding of the divine that's everywhere. At the same time, **I will respect and I will even use, the metaphorical language, or the prayer, as if God were somewhere else.** But I think what's happened is I see the danger, or limitations, of literalizing that metaphor into an understanding that God is *out there*.

Similarly, the host, Michael Dowd, makes an assertion that some may find surprising. He suggests that, in this modern age, if we continue to accept traditional metaphors for God as real—that is, as like a father or a king—then we “trivialize” God; we “belittle” God. **Dowd says,**

All of our concepts, all of our images and language for **God are personifications.** They are ways of *relationalizing*—of **expressing our relationship to reality**, to what is fundamentally real. And yet if we concretize, if we **make an idol, of any particular metaphor**, we then limit the divine—because we shift from thinking, “Reality is father-like,” to thinking, “God *is* father.” So, there's this **objectification of God as up-there-out-there somewhere**—a father who's looking down on us. Our brains do that pretty instinctually, so it's not a surprise that people have done that.

**Question 3A:** *How, if at all, **has your own understanding of God shifted since childhood?** And did this interview incline you to consider shifting your understanding again? Overall, **what does the word “God” mean to you?** And what do you think of Dowd's claim that [“God is not a person; God is reality personified.”](#)*

**Question 3B:** *As an exercise in his live programs, Michael Morwood sometimes asks participants to take a quiet moment to “Consider **the mystery we call ‘God’** — not as a ‘who’ but as a ‘what’ that is totally and utterly beyond all human concepts”. [Pause for silent*

*reflection.] Might such a shift in your sense of God heighten or diminish **your experience of prayer and worship**? [Pause for silent reflection.]*

4. **The Hubble Telescope.** Michael Morwood (as does **Linda Gibler** in a different interview in this series) mentions that in shifting his understanding of God he was “helped by the Hubble Telescope.” He also talks about seeing a corridor full of large Hubble Space Photos in the Chicago airport. He declares, “This is the worldview that people see. The church has to engage that.”

**Question 4:** *Did your own perspective on God, the universe, and the sacred shift at all for you when viewing the images sent back by the first powerful telescope to orbit Earth, the Hubble? When you look back on your own faith journey, **is there a “before Hubble” and an “after Hubble” threshold in your story, too?** Have you ever experienced any of these photos in a religious or church context — and/or would you like to?*

5. **Epic of Evolution.** Both Michael Morwood and the host, Michael Dowd, recount that their exposure to the ideas and works of **Thomas Berry** and **Brian Swimme** made a huge impact on their faith perspectives. Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme were some of the earliest leaders in translating the scientific understanding of an immense and ancient universe into a sacred and faith-enriching narrative.

**Question 5:** *Have you read or in some other way encountered what is sometimes called “the new story,” “the new cosmology,” “the great story,” or “the epic of evolution”? And if so, has it significantly impacted your worldview and how you live your faith? If not, does this interview series incline you to want to explore what that understanding and perspective might be able to offer you?*

6. **Reinterpreting Jesus.** Michael Morwood said this:

Where does Jesus come from? Jesus comes from God. Where is God? God is at work in the universe. **Jesus is a product of the universe.** Jesus is a product of the earth, of the divine presence at work in the earth, in the universe. So is the **Buddha**, so is **Confucius**, so are the **Australian aboriginal people**.

I would expect then that in a Jesus or a Buddha or the great religious leaders that this same divine presence — whatever word you put on it, God — would come to expression with some clarity; you must work together, **cooperate, stop the violence**, and that's how I see Jesus. I asked the question of Jesus, Who is he, where does he come from? He comes from the God, he's the expression of the divine at work in the universe, but **he's a product of the universe, he's a product of the earth. He's not dropped down from heaven.**

Jesus then to me is someone who gives expression to the divine, and then says to me and to others, is this who you are? Is this your story?

**Question 6: Who is Jesus for you?** Has your perspective on Jesus shifted during your life? And did this interview present you with a view of Jesus that invites you to continue shifting? If so, please say more.

7. **Reinterpreting the Eucharist and Baptism.** Michael Morwood, in “**naturalizing**” Christian concepts that formerly have been framed supernaturally, reinterprets the Eucharist. He says,

When I look at sacraments in the Christian tradition, and if I look particularly at the Roman Catholic notion of the **Eucharist**, I see that since the Middle Ages we've had this focus on *reception*. We do this with children at the age of seven or eight: [we tell them that] the sacrament is all about what you are *receiving* and how it's going to work. When I go back into the Jesus story and the night before he died, I'd want to tell a different story. I want to tell the story that **this sacrament is about, “Stand up and be counted!”** This is about **ritualizing one's readiness to give one's life to what one believes**. Augustine says this, too: “*You* are the bread, *you* are the body. This is *your* mystery that's put on the altar.” **Baptism**, again, is “Stand up and be counted!” This sacrament is a mature, solemn oath.

**Question 7: What is the Eucharist for you?** Has your perspective on this central Christian sacrament shifted since you were a child? And did this interview invite you to expand or shift your relationship to the Eucharist, or Holy Communion?

8. **The sacraments for empowerment.** Michael Morwood, in “**naturalizing**” the various sacraments, asserts,

Sacraments are not about dependence on a middle class to bring the sacred to us. **Sacraments are about empowerment**, leading us into a story that can empower us, challenge us, by **ritualizing** the wonder of who we are, but also the challenge to give witness. That's what liturgy is, too. I think liturgy should **not primarily be concerned with addressing a God who demands to be worshipped and gets annoyed when we're not there**. I think **liturgy, worship — it's for our sake, to nurture a story in us**, to deepen awareness, and then to call us to give witness to it.

**Question 8:** Have any of the Christian sacraments **given you a sense of empowerment**, as Michael Morwood suggests? Do you perhaps sense a possibility of approaching the sacraments with fresh eyes, so that they may make an even bigger or more practical difference in your life? (Address these questions — or what else they call forth — in whatever ways you wish.)

9. **What is prayer?** Michael Morwood talks about how his understanding and experience of prayer shifted radically, along with a lot of other aspects of his faith understanding. It is a more **naturalized** understanding of what prayer is about. He says,

For most of my life my *prayer life* was about trying to talk to **an external God**. That's where I was, and in many ways it worked well. So I would never say to people, “Don't pray that way.” But prayer for me now is not so much trying to reach out or talk to a listening, external deity. As I move into

trying to **honor the mystery of God everywhere, prayer now is my responsibility to deepen my awareness that I do live in a universe permeated with this presence**—that as a human person, I give expression to this mystery. **So prayer should be telling me who I am.** I think that's one of the key things about prayer: What does our prayer life tell us about who we are in relationship to God? Does it tell us we are distant from God? Does it tell us we are exiles? Is that what prayer tells us? Or does prayer honor, again, the Christian tradition: Hey! **We are the body of Christ; we are the earthen vessel that holds the treasure; we are the temples of God's spirit. So prayer primarily for me now is about slowing down. It's about awareness. It's about a sense of wonder, a sense of appreciation.**

**Question 9: What is prayer for you?** *Has your understanding and experience of prayer shifted during your life? And what is your response now to how Michael Morwood talks about his understanding and experience of prayer, and how that has shifted over time?*

10. **The Nicene Creed.** While Michael Morwood richly reinterprets God, Jesus, the sacraments, and prayer, he outright **rejects the Nicene Creed.** (So does the host, Michael Dowd.) In one of his most powerful assertions, Morwood says,

**Jesus** walked and talked in a universe that was permeated with the divine presence. I think that is so important because **institutional Christianity** refuses to say that. It still wants to tell the story of **dualism** — that God sent his Son from somewhere else and that Jesus is the innate Savior, in the sense of Jesus as the one who opens the gates of heaven and gets us access to a place where God is, a place that is somewhere else. To all this, I want to say, “No, I am not there anymore. I will not walk in that story, and I will not walk in that story as a Christian.” It's probably time for many Christians to be unapologetic about that.

I know in saying that, for example, I'm disagreeing with some of Paul's writing. I'm disagreeing with the writer of John's Gospel. I'm **disagreeing with the Nicene Creed.** People will ask, “How can you call yourself a Christian if you disagree with that?” I say, “Well, you tell me that you don't believe that Jesus walked and talked in a universe permeated with the divine presence. Tell me why you don't believe that.” I think that's a key point of discussion for Christians.

**Question 10:** *So, let us discuss: Does your religious tradition still have you reciting the **Nicene or Apostles Creed**? If so, is that a problem for you? And if you, yourself, unlike Michael Morwood, do not disagree with anything in the Bible, then how would you answer his challenge?*

11. **We are stardust!** Michael Morwood and host Michael Dowd both seem excited to talk about the scientific discovery that the **atoms in our bodies** not only cycle throughout Earth history (including having once resided in dinosaurs!) but that before our Solar System formed these very atoms were created in **the cores of ancient stars.** The idea that “we are made of stardust” has been a powerful awakening for many people to the wonders of the scientific story of creation.



**Question 11:** *Did you know of that scientific fact before encountering this particular dialogue or any of the other interviews in this series in which “stardust” is talked about? If so, do you remember where you first learned it — and whether that made a difference for you then. Alternatively, if this is an utterly new concept for you, did this conversation present it in a way that helps you see why the speakers are so excited about it? Many report feeling a stronger bond with God / Universe / Reality after they learned this? Is this true for you? Why or why not?*

12. **Deep-time eyes.** The host, **Michael Dowd**, introduced the term “deep-time eyes.” He said,

One of the great gifts of science is that **science helps us see**. It gives us ‘**deep-time eyes**’. It's as if [without the scientific view] we close one eye and lack depth dimension. Science helps us see what's right in front of us, what sometimes we might be tempted to see with shallow eyes. We can have a deep-time understanding and have a far richer relationship to what's before us than we could have possibly had without **a science-based understanding**. For example, looking up at the stars, knowing that those stars aren't, as the biblical writers believed, the pinprick holes in the dome of heaven that allows God's glory to shine through. Rather, we know that **those stars are our ancestors** and that our bodies are made of the stuff created in stars just like those [that we see tonight, but] that lived before our Sun was born. **Having deep-time eyes allows you to be present to the natural world in a richer way than without deep-time eyes.**

**Question 12:** *This concept of “deep-time eyes”, and the way Michael Dowd speaks of it: does that invite you to open more to the scientific worldview as a possible way to deepen your relationship to Reality? Please elaborate in any way you feel drawn to do.*

13. **The excitement of the new story.** Here's a particularly expressive part of the interview, where Michael Morwood conveys his excitement in the new story of an ancient, evolving universe:

So my primary concern in all that is for Christians especially to be able to say, “There's another story here.” **It's not just a new story about the universe, but there are stories in our tradition that gel well with this new story about the universe**, and how old the planet is, and evolutionary development, and all that.

My sense is, as I have walked in this story in the last 15 or 20 years, that **it's more exciting. It makes spirituality more alive. It makes Jesus become more human, more true, more dynamic. It makes far more sense of prayer and sacraments and liturgy than the old story ever did. So I'm enthused by it.** I think there's something there for people to be enthused by, rather than to be discouraged and say, “I don't know what to believe anymore.”

**Question 13:** *Reflect on that summary statement by Michael Morwood and use that as an opportunity to come up with whatever final statement you wish to make about what this interview meant to you.*

14. **Two poems.** Two poems are recited in this dialogue. The speakers draw upon **unpublished poems** that each was given by participants in their respective programs — participants who were very moved by a sacred understanding of what science is revealing.

**Question:** *What is your response to the poems (reprinted below)? Overall, what, if any, role does poetry play in your own communion with nature or the divine and in your cultivation of greater emotional or spiritual depth?*

**Michael Morwood** recited this poem by **Mary Shannon**:

Question:

A piece of dinosaur in me?

A drop of sea?

Small bird fallen from a tree?

A bit of Jesus even?

. . . Me?

Have I eaten from the treetops?

Crashed upon the rocks and crushed  
them into sand?

And did I one day fly?

Or heed a bleeding woman's cry?

. . . Die?

Why were we not told

That we are old as any star?

That God is in—not far

Or not be helped to see

That ultimately star chips  
called divinity . . . are we?

**Michael Dowd** recited this poem by **Joyce Keller**:

All my life I've wanted to believe in God,  
gone to church, followed every spiritual teacher in town,  
meditated and prayed, attended 12-step programs,  
but still I felt abandoned and alone in the universe.

All my life I've wanted to see the face of God.

Is he really just a mean old man in the sky?  
Perhaps God is a chubby Buddha,  
or maybe the Dalai Lama, always laughing.  
Or is She a woman, the green Tara, weeping pearl tears,  
the Virgin of Guadalupe, crowned with roses?

All my life I've tried to solve that old mystery,  
Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here?  
Then one day I saw the pictures  
sent back by the Hubble Telescope:  
Hot blue stars born out of the red glow of galaxies,  
a pulsating firestorm of fluorescent clouds,  
the obsidian sky of deep space.  
Spirals of comets, like swirling diamond necklaces.  
Black holes, exploding supernovas,  
a hundred thousand light-years away,  
endless, unimaginable, eternal.

And I knew that finally I had seen the face of God.

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