

Philip Clayton

“The Emergence of Culture, Mind, and Religion”

Episode 29 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Philip Clayton is a process theist and one of the most respected theologians and philosophers at the intersection of science and religion. He teaches at Claremont School of Theology in California. His books include *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*; *Evolution and Ethics*; *Science and Beyond*; and *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*.

HIGHLIGHTS

This interview with Philip Clayton joins that of John Cobb (episode 6) in featuring in-depth treatment of how **process theology** (launched in the early 20th century by Alfred North Whitehead) is actually **an early form of evolutionary Christianity** — with dynamic and ongoing **process replacing the Bible’s portrayal of a static Creation**. Unique to this interview is that Clayton and host Michael Dowd engage in a full and enthusiastic discussion of a leading-edge evolutionary philosophy: **emergentism**. Evolutionary emergence replaces long-standing forms of reductionist thought, which, ever since Darwin, have stifled attempts to integrate mainstream science into Christianity. Other topics include **Christian naturalism, pantheism, interfaith dialogue**, the **emergence of purpose (telos) in biology** and extended in humanity, the **evolutionary fitness of religions** (and whether *beliefs* need to be true or simply life-enhancing), why fossil evidence of **species extinctions** posed a severe challenge to Christian/Western thought in the early 1800s, recent discoveries that **cultural innovation is not unique to our species**, and whether we should consider **pre-scientific beliefs as pre-natural** (rather than *supernatural*).

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This episode is highly recommended for any secular or moderate-to-liberal religious discussion group or classroom setting. Because high-level concepts in philosophy, theology, science, and history pervade the dialogue, this episode is ideal for clergy, seminarians, and advanced students. Even so, the conversational format, colloquial sentence structure, and enthusiastic tone and personal reflection make it engaging for church discussion groups, as well. Because

of its focus on *emergent evolution*, it is one of the best episodes in this series for bridging the tension between those who preference spiritual-religious ways of knowing and those who look first and foremost to science.

BLOG COMMENTS

Nic Paton:

Philip: You are a specialist generalist, having sufficient depth in science, theology and philosophy to address these often separate domains with authority and depth. In addition to this, which I appreciate a lot, you have a strong sensibility for the poetic and the artistic elements in culture. And further, your enthusiasm, generosity, openness, and appreciation for the questions that our world is asking. As a fellow "emergentist" I really appreciate the hold you have on current thought in the sciences, to keep on grounding us in the underlying meanings of emergence without getting lost in the cliché or hubris surrounding that term.

Steve Maynard says:

As with the rest of this series, I enjoyed your dialogue (Philip and Michael) immensely — provocateurs of the highest order! Your brief discussion around the idea that spiritual diversity is like a healthy ecosystem was very useful and powerful imagery.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Process philosophy, process theology, conversion to Christianity, evolutionary science (as troubling for conservative faith), **Wolfhart Pannenberg, philosophy of science, early Church history, doctrine of the soul, timelessness v. change, species extinction** (discovery of), **Tennyson, "red in tooth and claw," Alfred North Whitehead, emergentism and emergentist, cultural evolution, Ursula Goodenough, Terry Deacon, Second Law of Thermodynamics, entropy, morphodynamics, teleodynamics, Stuart Kauffman, purpose, Jane Goodall, Frans de Waal, cultural transmission** (in humans and other intelligent social animals), **coevolution** (of biology and culture), **lactose tolerance/intolerance, emergence v. reductionism, Richard Dawkins, New Atheists, David Sloan Wilson, Loyal Rue, Joan Roughgarden, John Calvin, evolutionary fitness of religions** (for group survival), **comparative religion, utility v. truth of religious beliefs, competing religious stories** (how to account for), **metaphysics, a God of emergence, emergent systems, spirituality** (three faces of), **Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, John Leslie, directionality of evolution, values** (inherent in evolving universe), **theistic concept of God, theistic spirituality, deep-time eyes,**

global heart, valuing of evidence, diversity (as healthy), **diversity in ecosystems, global environmental crisis** (diverse religious responses to), **co-dependent arising** (of Buddhism), **interbeing, Thich Nhat Hanh, World Parliament of Religions, panentheism, Arthur Peacocke, creatheism, personification** (of reality), **Christian naturalism, Benson Saler, supernatural v pre-natural, day language v night language, David Ray Griffin, theism/atheism/deism** (as concepts developed before evolution was discovered), **naturalism, evidential reformation, spiritual-but-not-religious, integration of science and religion**

BIOGRAPHY

Philip Clayton is a philosopher and theologian specializing in a range of issues that arise at the intersection between science and religion. Over the last several decades he has published and lectured extensively on many branches of this debate, including the history of modern philosophy, philosophy of science, comparative religions, and constructive theology. In 1986 Clayton received a PhD jointly from the Philosophy and Religious Studies departments at Yale University. Currently, he is Ingraham Professor at Claremont School of Theology, and Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Claremont Graduate University.

In addition to a variety of named lectureships, he has held visiting professorships at the University of Cambridge, the University of Munich, and Harvard University. Clayton's numerous books and articles address the cultural battle currently raging between science and religion. Rejecting the 'scientism' of Dawkins, he argues, does not open the door to fundamentalism. Instead, a variety of complex and interesting positions are being obscured by the warring factions, whose fight to the death is attracting such intense attention today. Clayton has drawn on the resources of the sciences, philosophy, theology, and comparative religious thought to develop constructive partnerships between these two major cultural powers. His books include *Transforming Christian Theology*, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, *Evolution and Ethics*, *Science and Beyond*, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, and *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*. His blog can be found at <http://philipclayton.net>. Clayton also blogs for *Huffington Post* at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-clayton-phd>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO

Philip Clayton's YouTube channel, with many short videos:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/TransformingTheology>

5-minute clip of Clayton, "The Science of Emergence 101"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtLZoDkqswU&feature=related>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and new ones posted) at the following url:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/philip-clayton-the-emergence-of-mind-culture-and-religion/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **From atheist, to born again, to process theology.** As with all episodes in this series, host Michael Dowd asks his guest, Philip Clayton, to summarize his faith journey.

I came from an **atheist** family and had a fairly dramatic conversion to Christianity in my adolescent years. I'm sure an outsider might call it hormones, but it was for me an orientation and a life orientation that stayed with me.

I moved into a **very conservative version of Christianity**—probably to the right of most of your listeners. It was **struggling with the implications of science** in general and evolutionary science, in particular, that caused my faith to evolve at the same time. I remember the point in college—I was at a very conservative Christian college—when I **began to grapple with evolutionary science** and realized that there was a huge discontinuity between what I believed and the way that I approached God, on the one side, and what the sciences were saying. **I struggled for years.** I went to Germany and worked with a theologian named **Wolfhart Pannenberg**, who worked on theology and science. I went to Yale and began doing classes in the philosophy of science. I struggled to bring these two sides together.

It really took *years*, almost decades, before I realized that my Christianity didn't need to be opposed to the clear results in biology—that the **science didn't need to be opposed to a life of faith, even belief in God**, and that there were philosophical resources that would help to bridge those two disparate continents. In particular, I began to work in an area called **process philosophy**, which is a philosophy that builds change right into it. And so I went, I suppose, from a period of feeling complete incompatibility and despair, really—both in my faith side and my science side—to a sense that there was a **powerful convergence of science, philosophy, and faith in the direction of an evolutionary worldview and, for me, an evolutionary Christianity.**

Question 1A: *What most struck you (or surprised you or moved you) in Philip Clayton's telling of his personal faith journey?*

Question 1B: In Clayton's **3 stages of faith** (from atheist to conservative Christian to the liberal Christianity of process thought), we learn quite a bit about the struggles that precipitated his shift from stage 2 to stage 3 — but not about the first transition out of atheism. *Sifting through your own store of experience and reading, do you recall the details of anyone else's faith journey that propelled the same **shift: out of atheism into conservative Christianity**? If so, what was the impetus? If not, reach into your own life experience and offer a plausible story for what could have pushed or pulled the young Philip to make such a turnaround in perspective?*

Question 1C: *If a child is raised in a nonreligious or openly atheistic home and then experiences a conversion to Christianity as an adolescent, what (if any) would be the more likely form of Christian theology that attracted the conversion: **conservative or liberal**? And what evidence or reasoning underlies your response?*

Question 1D: *Have you yourself experienced any **breakthroughs** in this series generated by encountering the faith-journey stories reported thus far? For example, do the intensity and duration of faith struggles reported by many of the guests perhaps make you **feel less judgmental** about your own faith challenges — or the ongoing struggles of those you love?*

2. **Understanding process philosophy.** Among the 38 interviews in this series, two guests are internationally known as **leaders in what is called process thought**, or process philosophy, or process theology. The two are John Cobb and Philip Clayton, and they are colleagues at Claremont Graduate School of Theology in southern California.

Question 2A:

GROUP: *Who feels they have a good grasp of what process philosophy is and would volunteer to briefly explain it to the group?*

SOLO: *In one or two sentences, how would you **describe the key feature** (or features) of process theology?*

Question 2B: *Does your encounter with process thought in this interview, or in past experience, lead you to find it **attractive** and perhaps something that you want to learn more about it? Why or why not?*

3. **How the doctrine of the soul originated.** In providing a brief history of process thought, Philip Clayton offers a historical interpretation of the understanding of “**soul**” in early Christianity. He says,

At the time when church leaders were formulating the creeds of Christianity—when they were moving from the biblical documents and their experience of their founder Jesus into saying what it was that the church believed about him—at that time a philosophy was dominant and let’s just call it *substance metaphysics*. It was an understanding of reality where everything consisted of **timeless substances**. So any entity that you could talk about—a walrus, a rock, or a human being—had some eternal essence, some unchanging core of what it was. All the changing parts—my hair growing longer, my body growing older, what I’m thinking today versus what I was thinking yesterday—all those were called mere accidents. They’re just things that happen to this eternal core along the way.

In fact, the whole **doctrine of the soul** came in at that point, because the soul was something that was supposed to be eternal and unchanging. It came from God and would live forever with God, and in some ways it was barely touched by the to-and-fro of day-to-day thought. When you

look at some of the creeds and core documents of Christianity, you can see how this notion of timelessness was so important.

Question 3A: *What, if any, belief do you hold about the existence of human soul as a “timeless substance” that transcends the life and death of the physical body? And what experiences in your life or your education would you say account for your belief?*

Question 3B: *For religious doctrines that are part of your tradition, do you value learning about the historical timing and context of their birth? Why or why not?*

Question 3C: *How do you decide whether a religious doctrine or belief is important to you, and whether you choose to hold its truth literally or metaphorically? And is there a particular example that you could offer as an illustration of what seems typical of your approach?*

4. **From a static to a process view of the world.** Clayton and Dowd agree that the discovery of **fossils of creatures that no longer exist** was a major jolt to the Christian view of a static world that ensued following God’s original creation. The fact of species extinction was initially very difficult for theologians to account for. Here is the discussion:

Philip: So to make a long story short, fast forward a thousand years, we move into the modern period. We begin to get data of how the universe changed. It was a **shock** to the substance metaphysicians to find out that some **species weren’t eternal**. It was, for them, literally impossible that a species could come into existence or go out of existence. They were all created eternally by God, and no one could ever pass out of existence. We knew that people died, but we thought that species were eternal.

Host: Even our own president, **Thomas Jefferson**, was vehemently opposed to the idea that species could go extinct. In fact, one of the things that factored into his launching the **Lewis and Clark Expedition** was, in part, to prove George Cuvier wrong. Cuvier had been proposing that extinction was real, because he found these bones and teeth of **mastodons** and **mammoths** and, clearly, these kinds of elephants no longer existed anywhere in the world. The story goes that Thomas Jefferson took Meriwether Lewis aside and said, “Hey, I want you guys to find some mammoths and mastodons out there in the West because I want to prove Cuvier wrong.”

Philip: The poem from **Tennyson** from which we get this line about “red in tooth and claw” is actually about the shock to Victorian England in the 1850s, when fossils were found of species that no longer existed. As we realized that we were in a world of pervasive change, philosophers realized that we needed a different view of reality itself to correspond to that. A number of people, in the 1800s mostly, began to think of **views of reality that would build process or change into them**. That culminated in the ideas of a philosopher in the early twentieth century named **Alfred North Whitehead**. He thought maybe more deeply than anyone before him of what pervasive process would look like, which he presented in a book called *Process and Reality*. That spawned a huge movement of process philosophy, and then process theology, that drew on this resource. Think of **the universe not as static substances but as ever-changing moments of experience**: that’s the core idea.

Question 4A: Fossils of **trilobites** and fossil skeletons of **large marine reptiles** that coexisted with the dinosaurs were discovered decades before the fossil skeleton of the dinosaur

Iguanodon was discovered in the U.K. *Why do you think it took the discovery of a huge land-dwelling **dinosaur** to convince most naturalists of the fact of extinction?*

Question 4B: Try to put yourself into the shoes of a philosopher or religious leader or broadly educated individual who lived during the mid 1800s, when the big dinosaur fossils were first being discovered. *Can you grasp **why accepting species extinction would have been deeply upsetting** to your worldview?*

Question 4C: **Charles Darwin** accepted species extinction as a fact even when he was a young man fresh out of college, exploring the world on a ship called the *Beagle*, and finding fossils of extinct mammals in South America. The voyage of the *Beagle* took place during the early 1930s. A quarter century later, Charles Darwin shocked the world with his theory of species changing through time via, what he called, ‘natural selection.’ Now consider: **Prior to Darwin’s theory of ongoing species change, no one could have named any positive, creative role for the fact of extinction.** Extinction would have implied only that God had created a world that not only fell but that was diminishing through time. So here is the question: *Given your personality and values, if you had been an educated person living in 1859, do you think you **would you have been repulsed by Darwin’s theory?** Or would you have been **relieved to finally grasp that species extinction played a positive role** in the gradual evolution of complex life over millions of years? Overall, what would have been your reaction to the new theory of biological change through time?*

5. **The ‘emergentist’ perspective.** ‘Emergence’ as a key process in **how physical, biological, and cultural complexity developed through time** has been discussed briefly in several of the dialogues in this series. But it is in this conversation with process theologian Philip Clayton that the concept of emergence becomes central. Indeed, both Clayton and Dowd enthusiastically self-identify as **emergentists**.

Question 5A:

GROUP: *Who is personally attracted to and excited by the process of emergence and would like to briefly **summarize it for the group** — both what it is and why it is appealing to you?*

SOLO: *In one or two sentences, how would you **describe the key feature** (or features) of the process of emergence? Then give an example of emergence in each of three realms: physical, biological, and cultural.*

Question 5B: *Does your encounter with the process of **emergence** in this interview, or in past experience, lead you to find it **attractive** in any way? Why or why not?*

Question 5C: *Think of a quality of yourself — perhaps an aspect of your wisdom, or a sense of your primary purpose in life, or your ability to emotionally survive big challenges — that might*

genuinely qualify as an emergent property of your own maturation process? What would that quality be, and what makes it feel like an emergent part of your character?

Question 5D: *Some spiritual or religious people are wary of or even hostile to the scientific worldview, and for a variety of reasons. How might learning about the process of emergence help ease the tension between science and spirituality?*

6. **Thermodynamics, morphodynamics, and teleodynamics.** Neuroscientist and evolutionary thinker **Terry Deacon** is the author of a 2011 book in which he groups all of the emergences since the beginning of the Universe into three major categories: thermodynamics, morphodynamics, and teleodynamics. (Deacon's book is *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerges from Matter*.) Here are excerpts of how Philip Clayton explains Terry Deacon's classification system:

The first [category of emergence] is *thermodynamics*, and that's something that we have in pre-life form; it's basically the dynamics of **heat transfer**. . . Then we have something that Terry calls *morphodynamics*, the **dynamics of forms**. A great example would be a snowflake . . . no two snowflakes are the same. They each have their own unique history.

Life forms presuppose thermodynamics and they presuppose the dynamics of forms, but they have a third kind of dynamic that Terry calls *teleodynamics*, from *telos* (meaning, order, design, or purpose). And that doesn't mean a God-purpose—though that might come later. It means that when any life form exists in an environment, it has some purposes that pertain to it as a living thing. Stuart Kauffman, a theorist in this field, says that **every one of us is out to make a living in our ecosystem**. So a little, tiny, single-cell organism floating in, let's say, liquid in a lake, has its purposes to correctly discern food sources and to move its little tail—its flagellum—so that it goes toward its food sources and to avoid toxins or poisons in the environment, and to move away from those.

So do you see that **each one of those is a different level of emergence?** Terry Deacon calls them *the three levels of emergence*: heat systems, and then systems where the form of the object helps determine its trajectory, and finally living systems that exist for purposes—**the purpose of survival and reproduction**.

Question 6A: *Biologists would say that what **all life forms share in common** is that they naturally or instinctively act in ways to aid their survival and reproduction. When you reflect on **humans** individually and in our societal groups, would you conclude that any **new "purposes"** have emerged with us? If so, what might they be? If not, why so?*

Question 6B: *What about the sense of purpose, of "telos," in **your own life**? Have there been new emergent purposes at different **stages of your life**? And have there been challenging **transitions** when purposes that once energized you began to fade, but your next sense of purpose hadn't emerged yet?*

Question 6C: *Based on your life experience, what helpful actions or reflections might someone engage in to assist in the birth of their next phase of life purpose?*

Question 6D: *What, if any, functions do religions serve in helping our species in its two biological functions (survival and reproduction). Does religion assist any of the newly emergent purposes you may have identified in the previous questions?*

NOTE TO GROUP LEADER: Clayton talks about the **Second Law of Thermodynamics** in this way:

Every time there's an interaction, disorder increases. Physicists call it **entropy**—and it means there is no free lunch. Whenever physical systems interact or biological systems interact, the net result is increase in disorder—so that the history of the universe shows this line from ordered states to disordered states. So thermodynamics applies across the physical universe.

Be aware that **biblical literalists** who dispute evidence of an old Earth and an evolving universe, regularly **mischaracterize the Second Law of Thermodynamics** to imply that nature cannot give rise, on its own, to greater complexity out of simple forms. Nonscientists are easily swayed by that false portrayal of the Second Law. It is true that entropy must increase over time — but only in the universe as a whole. Pockets of greater complexity naturally emerge, but the result is degraded forms of energy being sloughed off into the environment surrounding those pockets of complexity. Here is an easy example: Consider the persistent process of entropy increase in your home. Yet it is the breakdown of structured energy in food that you or your cleaner consumes that makes anti-entropic clean-up happen. The food ultimately transits into the surrounding environment as carbon dioxide and bodily waste, both of which are much higher entropy than the original food. **Teilhard de Chardin** said it poetically this way, “To think, we must eat. But what a variety of thoughts we get out of one slice of bread!” *The Phenomenon of Man* (ch. “The Within of Things”).

7. **Cultural animals.** Philip Clayton talks about how exciting it has been for him to learn about scientific discoveries (beginning with discoveries by **Jane Goodall**) that keep producing more examples of intelligent bird and mammal populations that develop distinctive cultural emergences (such as tool use) that other populations of their same species lack. What once was assumed to be unique to humans — cultural invention and passing forward — no longer distinguishes us.

Question 7: *Do you find this continuity between humans and other social mammals and birds exciting or disturbing? Just how distinct from other creatures do you want to believe we are? And can you trace back through your personal history for shaping influences in your own life that bear on how you answer such questions?*

8. **The coevolution of human biology and culture.** Philip Clayton talks about how biological and cultural evolution intertwine. He uses as an example the ability of some human ethnicities to continue to **digest the lactose in milk** well beyond the time when we are weaned from mother's breast. Clayton says:

There's a beautiful interaction between biological explanations and cultural explanations. Let's take, for example, **lactose intolerance**. Human beings were not able, at first, to process cow's milk. But as the keeping of cows and dairy technologies grew, more and more human beings developed the enzymes in their stomachs to break down cow's milk. And now it's a huge proportion of the human population that nourishes itself through cow's milk and dairy products. But that meant that there's actually been a biological change—a change in enzymes in human beings. What are the causes? Well, is milk valued? Are the technologies of caring for **cows** and taking care of milk found? Is milk valued by a religious tradition? So you see how there's what we call a *coevolution* of these various cultural features and the biological features.

Question 8A: *Do you remember when you first started wondering why some people can drink milk and others can't? And is it satisfying — perhaps even exciting — **to learn the evolutionary story** of why that is so? Indeed, that it is not lactose intolerance among adults that is surprising but lactose tolerance. And do you see how an adult body that continues to manufacture **lactase** (the enzyme that digests molecules) signals that a person's **ancestors** lived in a culture that had kept milk cows or goats?*

Question 8B: Clayton gives a second example of how culture profoundly influences biological evolution in humans over time:

The clearest [example] is **mate selection**, right? I mean, what *more* influences biological evolution than who somebody chooses to mate with? And yet think of all the complex factors that influence mate selection. **Religious and moral beliefs**—very highly abstract beliefs—are some of the most complicated things about us, and they influence that fundamental feature of biological evolution.

*So the question, again, is this: Do you appreciate the evolutionary way of seeing the world for the way it can lend **insight into human biological and cultural differences**? And do you see how **religious doctrines** that affect what a people eats, who they may marry, and so forth may profoundly influence the health, fitness, and survivability not only of individuals but of **groups** as a whole?*

Question 8C: *Given all this background, do you think a religious group or institution is in danger of losing its fitness if **it clings to ancient doctrines and practices** even though the physical and social environments have changed enormously over time? If so, what would be some **examples** of this kind of unhealthy **doctrinal inertia**?*

9. **Scientific emergentism as a corrective to scientific reductionism.** Philip Clayton and Michael Dowd contrast the presumed “reductionism” of **Richard Dawkins** with the “emergentism” of other biologists and scholars, notably **David Sloan Wilson**, **Loyal Rue**, and **Joan Roughgarden**. While biologist Richard Dawkins interprets **no evolutionary function for religion**, the other three absolutely do. Clayton then explains the functional view taken by emergentists:

The emergentist says, “Amazing! Look at this organism that is so complex that it forms internal representations of the world. It forms its own vision of reality as a whole, and then begins to act according to that vision.” We need to include psychology, introspection, sociology, cultural anthropology as scientific disciplines that help us to understand the human person. What about an animal whose **religious beliefs are so important that a person will die for them**? It will orient its life around belief in God. Are you going to say, “Oh, well, that just serves biological purposes”? The true emergentist would say, “then *that* becomes part of the explanatory story of this animal; it’s **not a delusion, but a core part of its reality.**”

Question 9: *To what extent are you aware of biologist Richard Dawkins’s rather disparaging view of religion, as presented in his 2006 book, The God Delusion? What about the counter-arguments made by the experts that Michael Dowd mentions: David Sloan Wilson, Loyal Rue, and Joan Roughgarden? Overall, to what extent **do you care** whether the experts report that religious beliefs and practices that have stood the test of time actually do help individuals and groups in an evolutionary way — that is, in surviving and reproducing, generation upon generation?*

10. **Religious beliefs: true or useful?** Philip Clayton and Michael Dowd also explore this question:

Question 10A: If emergentists are correct that **religious beliefs** and the communities that cohere around those beliefs actually do **help individuals to survive** and that they also pass forward **group-enhancing values** to succeeding generations, and if shared religious belief actually does induce individuals to work together cooperatively to **defend** against marauding groups and to **outcompete** others, then *does that mean religious beliefs need only be **useful** — rather than **true**? What thoughts and feelings come up for you when considering this question?*

Question 10B: *On this issue of religious belief being **useful rather than true**, consider the points raised by Dowd and Clayton (reprinted below) and then **reflect on whether you stand more in Dowd’s camp or Clayton’s** on this particular issue. Here are the two lengthy quotations:*

DOWD: If we’re going to talk about which metaphysical understandings might be **true**, we need to take in the fact that we have **hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of competing stories** (or that seem like competing stories) about what God or the Goddess supposedly said or did. And so the question where I come to is: How can I understand those in ways that don’t force me to think that God is a schizophrenic or has a multiple personality disorder, but in fact that these are people’s self-experience—that is, **personified or relationalized aspects of their reality** in their part of the world.

For me, even language of *belief* in God—I don’t find it particularly useful or inspiring. *Belief* in God mattered when we had **pre-natural** (what gets sometimes called *supernatural*), but we had *pre-natural* understandings of reality. In a world that’s more and more given by evidence, I don’t

have to *believe* in God. I *know* that reality is divine—that reality is creative, and I feel very comfortable using traditional religious language to talk about that. . . .

But I also acknowledge the legitimacy of *not* using religious language to talk about reality as a whole. So I perhaps do that integration or bridge-building a little bit differently than you do, because I'm less interested in those sorts of large-scale metaphysics. I'm a **pragmatist** in a very real sense. For me the question is, How do we live in right relationship to reality and support each other in doing the same?

CLAYTON: The hard question—and I think it's good that we struggle with it a little bit—is: **Can one be an evolutionist and also hold some specific metaphysical beliefs?** Are my Hindu friends, who believe in Brahman, mistaken? Is that an *anti*-evolutionary move? Or, is it compatible with evolution to believe that there's a **highest reality which is characterized by consciousness and bliss?** I think that they don't make a mistake. They need to be humble about knowing that they've gone beyond what the evolutionary theory can show. But I think that **emergent evolution opens up the space for dialogue about such ultimate beliefs.**

So maybe in the series, I can be one voice (alongside many other voices) with a slightly different perspective. And I can say to some of your listeners: If you hold a belief in God or a belief in Brahman that this is not ruled out by evolution. It's still compatible, in my view, with evolution. **It's a different sort of discourse, but it's not an anti-scientific discourse,** as such. I just think that that's exciting for the broader evolutionary discussion. **Those of us in the debate hold much in common when it comes to the dynamics of evolution.** We have the most trouble when we get up to the divergences.

11. A God of emergence.

Question 11: *What is your sense of and response to the following two points that Philip Clayton makes about God?*

- If one listens carefully to the various participants in this discussion that you're hosting, Michael, one sees that they go from Integral spirituality to Eastern metaphysics, and then some, like myself, are theists. **I'm a process theist—that is, not a static God, but a God of emergence.** And it's kind of exciting to see that such a range of metaphysical views can motivate thinkers who share so much in common when it comes to the evolutionary story.
- It seems to me that the evolutionary story should cause Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers in God to understand that **God cares about the process of evolution and somehow enters into a world of change.** A God who is present to human beings would *have* to be a God who wasn't outside of time but was able at least to immerse God's Self in the temporal process itself.

12. **Three categories of "spirituality."** Philip Clayton urges that we think about "spirituality" as pertaining to three different categories: (1) a minimalist form that encompasses **subjective experience** triggered by *natural* events; (2) a sense that **the evolutionary process itself has a direction** and that **values** are important far beyond human concerns; and (3) **theistic spirituality**, which Clayton describes as a form he holds and that is "compatible with those who might believe in **the actual existence of a God**—an ultimate reality that lies behind the whole evolutionary process or toward which it is evolving."

Question 12A: *Is this three-tier description of “spirituality” useful for you? Why or why not?*

Question 12B: *Which (if any) of these three facets of spirituality most pertains to your own personal experience?*

13. **Deep-time eyes, a global heart, and valuing evidence.** Michael Dowd admits to having little interest in debating “**metaphysics**” in this Evolutionary Christianity series because he hopes that speakers and listeners will **focus instead on what they may have in common**. In quite a few of the 38 conversations Dowd offers three possible points of unity. **Dowd explains** to Clayton:

If somebody has what I call **deep-time eyes** (that is, an evolutionary understanding, a deep-time understanding of reality, both past and future), and if they have a **global heart** (that is, a commitment to the health and wellbeing of the entire planet and its species), and a **valuing of evidence** as in some very real sense, divine communication: If people have those three understandings and values, then frankly **it doesn’t matter to me what their metaphysics may be**, what their theology may be. All the different kinds of ways that people structure and think about ultimate reality is of less interest to me than deep-time eyes, a global heart, and a valuing of evidence as divine communication. Because frankly, I think our differences on some of the other stuff are actually a good thing. I think it’s healthy, like an ecosystem. You don’t want all the same species. It’s the **diversity** of species in an ecosystem that makes for its health, and I think **the same is true in consciousness**.

Question 13: *Where do you stand on each of these three points? Do you agree with Dowd on their importance as unifying values at the core of the Evolutionary Christianity movement? Do you perhaps sense other elements of a “core commons” emerging in this conversation series, and if so, what might they be?*

14. **Interfaith dialogue.** Philip Clayton speaks about **religious diversity** as a good thing for responding to the “**global environmental crisis**.” He recounts his experience at the 2009 World Parliament of Religions, held in Melbourne:

It was fascinating to see the diverse resources that the different religious leaders from around the planet brought to the same question. The **Buddhist** speaker could move me and the audience to tears, as he described that call—because we all have a **co-dependent arising** and we’re all interdependent. We have what Thich Nhat Hanh calls, *inter-being*, and therefore the fate of the ecosystems is indeed our own fate. And then a **native indigenous** religious leader could speak, and she had the sense of the **sacredness of each environment and each animal**. And then a **Jewish** speaker could speak of the **holiness of the planet**. And **Muslim** speakers spoke similarly. I recognized that there is something equally profound to what *their* traditions bring—you couldn’t walk away from that discussion without feeling, Wow! The various religious traditions of the world working together in this way offer incredible resources to motivate us to change.

Question 14: *What importance do you place on **interfaith dialogue**? And what has been your most memorable experience of such dialogue?*

15. **Panentheism.** *One of the key terms and concepts of process philosophy is panentheism. Here is how Philip Clayton explains what it is and why it is important:*

Panentheism is a clunky word; I wish I could find another one, but it's what the tradition has been using for almost two hundred years—so I'm sort of stuck with it. It has a simple definition. It means, **the belief that the world is contained within the divine, although God is also more than the world.** It's a view that one can find in the **Hebrew** Bible and in the **Christian** New Testament, as well as in the Jewish mystical traditions—Kabbalah and much of Jewish Hasidic tradition. One can find it in **Islam**, both in the *Qu'ran* and in Sufi traditions. And it's pervasive in **Hindu** traditions. It's a belief that **God should not be understood as fully separate from the world**—as if God existed *out* there, like the man on the cloud with the white beard—but that **God's spirit pervades all things that exist.** If all of evolution occurs *within* the divine, then we can understand, for those of us who believe in God, God's presence to every living form, to all parts of evolution, in an immediate way.

Question 15: *Have you encountered this concept of **panentheism** before? And what (if anything) about it do you find **attractive**?*

16. **Christian naturalism.** Dowd asks Clayton to explain a term that both of them sometimes use to describe themselves: **Christian naturalist** and **Christian naturalism.** Clayton explains,

In the modern period, as people tried to understand how God was related to the world, they first coined the term, **supernatural.** And it, again, suggested that there was this natural sphere—and then, if you're religious, you had to somehow negate that and put all your attention up onto the supernatural level. But that doesn't seem right. Again, that doesn't accord with the Christian or Jewish scriptures, which understand a God who's somehow pervasively present. So people began to let the supernatural side go. It was a move a few hundred years ago to try to solve some problems that actually created more problems than it solved. Instead, we began to focus on the *natural* sphere.

So **we're naturalists**, in that **we want to learn about the world as it reveals itself to us**—if I may, with a kind of natural piety. We want to see, how is it that systems evolve?—whether they're genetic systems, or systems of cells, or systems of organs, or ecosystems, or cultural systems, or religious systems. How do they actually evolve and grow? What are the dynamics? For those of us who want to speak of the divine, we want to ask how that is a part of these systems? Those of us who, like me, **want to still use the word God** want to ask, How can we understand God in light of these systems?

Not everybody still wants to use that term within the evolutionary community—that's completely fine. But some of us actually *do*, and I think it's fully compatible with the evolutionary story as long as **one still keeps the focus on how these systems evolve and grow and integrates the God language—integrates the religious story—into that natural story**, as well. The *naturalism* focuses, I think, on the dimension of the here and now: that which lies around us, that which we can understand and comprehend.

Question 16A: Reflecting on Clayton’s explanation of “naturalism,” to what extent (if at all) does that term apply to **your worldview**?

Question 16B: A number of worldview labels have been introduced in this conversation. Both Clayton and Dowd readily refer to themselves as **Christian naturalists** and as **emergentists**. In addition, Clayton self-identifies as a **process theist** and **panentheist**. Dowd self-identifies as a **creatheist** (a term he invented) and an **evidentialist**. *What worldview or religious labels are you comfortable using to signify your perspective and/or beliefs?*

17. **Pre-natural, supernatural, and natural.** Dowd and Clayton discuss the roots of *supernaturalism* in the Western religious traditions:

DOWD: I myself have been thinking in terms of *supernaturalism* really as, in many ways, *pre-natural*. I remember reading a few years ago Benson Saler’s watershed 1977 American Anthropological Association *Ethos* paper, titled “Supernatural As a Western Category.” One of the points that he makes there is that **this idea of the supernatural, as we today think about it, only came into being once we began having a sense of the natural in a measurable, modern sense.**

Prior to that, reality was spoken about using a blend of, what I call, **day language** and **night language**—that is, elements that occur to us during the daytime and some things that only happen to us at nighttime (in terms of some of the fantastic and seemingly supernatural things that we do in our dreams but that aren’t *supernatural* because they’re what we understand happened in the dream-state). As you said before, this notion of **‘theism’ and ‘atheism’ and also ‘deism’ really came into being long before we had any understanding of evolutionary emergence.** So I’ve come to think of ‘theism’ and ‘atheism’ as in some ways—at least as traditionally spoken about—as in some ways outdated, misleading, and unnecessarily divisive concepts.

CLAYTON: The sad thing is that **although the worldview of science changed into an evolutionary worldview, the religions that took on supernaturalism as their call, as their focus, didn’t change.**

Question 17: *What was most helpful for you in this brief dialogue? And do you find yourself more in agreement or disagreement with their shared position on the term ‘supernatural’?*

18. **Integrating science and religion: final remarks.** The closing statements made by Philip Clayton and Michael Dowd in this dialogue are these:

DOWD: I hope that we are in the early stages of **a much larger reformation than even the Protestant Reformation.** In this reformation I see us grounding our understanding of reality, of God, and our understanding of how to live in right relationship to reality, and to support others in doing the same: that we will get that not just from scripture, not just from tradition—but we will get that through **evidence**, all forms of evidence. I see it as an **evidential reformation.**

CLAYTON: Those who in the name of *science* would **destroy all value, all spirituality, all religion**—on the one hand—and those who in the name of *religion* would destroy all the good parts

that the religious traditions have mediated to us: I can only hope that those groups that would squelch that synthesis—that deny that **integration**—that they become increasingly marginalized.

Question 18: Offer *your own concluding remarks*. You may choose to comment on whatever came up for you in reading their concluding remarks, or perhaps what you found most useful or memorable about this dialogue as a whole, or maybe an issue that arose for you that feels important but which you have not yet resolved to your own satisfaction.

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