

## Linda Gibler

### “An Evolutionary View of Sacraments”

Episode 33 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com

---



**Linda Gibler** is a Dominican Sister and associate academic dean at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. She is also adjunct professor for the Loyola Institute for Ministry. She is co-editor and contributing author of *The Evolutionary Epic: Science's Story and Humanity's Response*. Her book *From the Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire* is the subject of this interview.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

Linda Gibler, a **theologian**, is one of six **Roman Catholic** sisters interviewed in this series. She is deeply grounded in the **cosmological sciences**, as well as in her own religious tradition. She is one of several speakers who tell the stories of their **sudden and profound awakenings to the Universe itself in a religious way**. Because Gibler undertook a great deal of scientific study while working on her doctorate in philosophy and religion, this interview is exceptional in demonstrating that one can fully **embrace science in ways that actually enrich one's experience of the divine, while maintaining congruence with traditional Christian doctrines**. This dialogue is also very strong in examining whether religious doctrines contributed to the **ecological crisis**, and how they might now contribute toward solutions. As well, the **distinction between theism and pantheism**, and what that distinction means for Christians today, is a highlight of this dialogue.

#### SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Any Catholic or other Christian audience for whom the sacraments are of great concern would benefit from this particular dialogue. Anyone keen on exploring differences in various religious “isms” (especially pantheism v. theism) will appreciate the in-depth colloquy prompted by the host's challenging queries in this regard. If the role of religions in motivating beneficial responses to the ecological crisis are important for an audience, then this interview is a must. Because Gibler draws upon systematic theology in her responses, this dialogue is highly recommended for all seminarians and theology students. Finally, Gibler is a very clear speaker,

so audiences for whom English is a second language will be grateful for how easy she is to understand.

## BLOG COMMENTS

### Desmond Howard says:

I am so grateful for the technology that allows me to purchase an e-copy of Linda's book even before I finished listening to the conversation! I am searching it to further elucidate Linda's concept of the human intuition/memory derived from the time when we were stardust.

Recently, in a First Nations Sweat Lodge, I was encouraged to breathe so deeply that this life-giving air might find my umbilical cord and hence the umbilical cords of my ancestors. I can work with that, even if it is a stretch. But to look for a DNA trace from my days in space? WOW, indeed. I have already been in conversation with my grandchildren comparing the burning of a candle and the glowing in our lives as being essentially the same process. It certainly gives new meaning to singing the chorus, "This little light of mine, I'm goin' to let it shine." Thank you, Linda and Michael.

## KEYWORD TOPICS

**Brian Swimme, Roman Catholicism** (effects of Vatican II), **God** (traditional concept of as too small), **stories of awakening** (to an evolutionary Universe), **Hubble Telescope** (significance of its photos), **Hubble Deep Field photo**, **Universe** (grandness of), **Teilhard de Chardin**, **Joel de Rosnay**, **Andromeda Galaxy**, **Thomas Aquinas**, **sacraments** (cosmocentric understandings of), **baptism** (its relevance today), **cosmocentric sacramentality**, **stars** (the science of their birth), **water** (its role in starbirth), **Big Bang** (and other names for the beginning), **Creation** (cosmocentric understandings of), **olive oil** (in baptism), **fire** (in baptism), **cellular metabolism** (as like a candle), **Thomas Berry**, **Brian Swimme**, **John Haught**, **Kenan B. Osborne**, **grace moments** (as identified by Thomas Berry), **ecological crisis** (whether theology impedes concern), **isms** (distinctions between theism, atheism, pantheism, panentheism), **pantheism** (Catholic negativity toward), **nested emergence**, **reverence for nature** (theistic v. nontheistic distinctions of), **materialism**, **emergentism**, **liturgy** (adapting for ecological and evolutionary sensitivity)

## BIOGRAPHY

**Linda Gibler** joined the Dominican Sisters of Houston in 1985. She is associate academic dean at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas, and an adjunct professor for the Loyola Institute for Ministry. Concurrently a science editor for the Collins Foundation Press, she

served as co-editor (and contributing author) of the 2009 volume, *The Evolutionary Epic: Science's Story and Humanity's Response*.

Overwhelmed by the first Hubble Deep Field picture, Linda became enchanted with the magnificence of the Universe and intrigued by the image's significance for a Catholic understanding of God. So in 1999 she began formal study of cosmology (with Professor Brian Swimme) at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where she completed a masters and then a PhD in Philosophy and Religion, with an emphasis in philosophy, cosmology, and consciousness. Prior to her cosmological studies, she earned a masters degree in pastoral studies at Aquinas Institute of Theology (St. Louis, Missouri) and a BA in sociology and life science ethics at the William Paterson College of New Jersey.

Before her reorientation toward a scholarly vocation, Linda was the director of social ministry for a parish in Houston, where she coordinated direct services, social outreach, and social justice programs. She worked for a Texas agency to insure health care for indigent women, and served on a hospital medical ethics board.

Linda delights in telling the 14 billion-year story of the Universe, stars, and Earth, as well as the stories of the common things that surround us. Her book, *From the Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire* (Liturgical Press, 2010), tells the cosmic stories of the primary sacramental of baptism and considers the difference it would make if we allowed Nature to teach us about God, ourselves, and right relationship with all members of the Earth community.

## SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and more can be added) at the following webpage: <http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/linda-gibler-cosmocentric-sacramentality/>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Hubble Deep Field Photo.** Linda Gibler speaks of her awakening to the grandeur of the Universe in a way that gave her a bigger sense of God, as well. She recalls,

In 1994, as a Dominican sister, one of the sisters brought home the ***Canticle to the Cosmos series that Brian Swimme*** did. It showed us all the beautiful pictures of the Universe and a different way of understanding Creation. I began to understand that **my concept of God was too small**—that the image that I had of God was just **not large enough to contain the Universe** that I was being exposed to in that video series.

Then I came across the **Hubble Deep Field picture in 1995**, as it was released in *National Geographic* magazine—and I still have that same *National Geographic* magazine. What it did was it showed through a very tiny window of space ten days exposure of the night sky. What the

astronomers expected to find in that little tiny window was not much: a couple of quasars, maybe a distant galaxy. They expected to find not much at all. But what they *did* find was **1,500 galaxies**.

**That image was like shattering the Christmas ornament**—as if it just fell and broke on the ground. My image of God, as beautiful as it was—my image of what the Universe was, as beautiful as that was—just broke into shards. But for me, it was a joyful [task] re-collecting those pieces and reassembling those pieces in a way that would bring even more richness and more depth and more beauty. And that’s what I’ve been doing with my life ever since then: **looking at the beauty of creation in a grander way that just opened my understanding of God in much more grand way**... So for me, deepening my understanding of the Universe automatically was deepening my understanding of the divine.

**Question 1A:** *What is your response to Linda Gibler’s story of awakening to a scientific view of the Universe? As well, do you recall having an emotional response to seeing the photographs newly capture by the Hubble Space Telescope?*

**Question 1B:** *Have you ever had an experience that challenged, or even “shattered”, your concept of God or of your understanding of some religious doctrine? If so, how did you come through it? If not, do you feel secure in and enlivened by your present understanding and experience of the divine, or are you looking for change?*

2. **The value of personal stories.** In this Evolutionary Christianity series, the host usually invites the guest at the beginning to recount the story of **how she or he came to embrace both science and faith**. Linda Gibler’s story is among the most profound and memorable of such responses.

**Question 2:** *How important is it for you to hear a speaker recount his or her personal story? For example, are you perhaps more receptive to hearing theological concepts and beliefs that differ from your own if the speaker first gives you an inside look at how, emotionally, they came to those ideas? Or, are their credentials, as given in their biography more important to you in discerning the value in what they say?*

3. **Baptism: a modern understanding.** Linda Gibler has written an entire book on how to understand the continuing importance of **baptism** within a scientifically rigorous understanding of **the scale and age of the Universe**. She summarizes her conclusions briefly during this interview. She says,

As the Universe is created, God blesses it. God calls it “good” and He blesses the Creation over and over again. **When Jesus is baptized**, according to St. Irenaeus, the entire Universe is once again blessed through Jesus’ baptism. When Jesus’ human nature is baptized, **the blessing ripples out from Jesus through all of Creation**—and the blessing is once again restored. And then when each one of us is baptized, we celebrate that blessing in that individual. We celebrate God’s presence—not only to the world but to this one person. And we commit ourselves in that

person—that child or that adult—to continually respond to that blessing of God. So, **that’s why we baptize. We need to celebrate the blessing in particular and then to make a commitment to walk in light of that blessing for the rest of our lives.**

**Question 3A:** *Is this kind of re-working of past understandings of ancient sacraments important to you? If the sacraments, such as **baptism and Eucharist**, are important to you, are you hungry for this kind of effort to mesh each with our **naturalized understanding** of the world? Or is the sacrament itself something that you undertake at a level that has very little to do with rational understanding—and thus has **little need of rational support**? Alternatively, if Christian sacraments are not part of your life, what (if anything) do you undertake as a periodic renewal of your presence and hope for the world, or which rites of passage have you experienced in a sacramental way?*

**Question 3B:** *Would the importance of **rational explanation** for taking part in a sacrament likely differ if one first experienced the sacrament as a **child**, versus having one’s first experience of it as an **adult**?*

**Question 3C:** *How do you understand “**sacraments**” and “the sacramental” from an **evolutionary perspective**?*

4. **“Cosmocentric sacramentality.”** Linda Gibler coined the term “cosmocentric sacramentality” to signify the kind of work she does in placing an ancient sacrament in the context of our new understanding of a vast and ancient Universe. That is, long before our own species began inventing and conducting sacramental practices to honor the divine, **the Cosmos itself was, in a way, participating in sacramentals.** She explains,

Where does something like *baptism* show up in the Universe story—from the very beginning right to the present? What would **baptism** mean if we knew there was a **13.7 billion year tradition** of the initiation into God’s blessing?

Near the end of the interview, she says,

What I would like is to be able to describe better the **cosmic liturgy** that is constantly going on—that sacramental celebration that is constantly going on, and that humans enter into in a uniquely human way, with the possibility of seeing the cosmic liturgy that surrounds us constantly. **Then we will be living a deeply sacramental life.**

**Question 4:** *Can you step into the expansive and “**deep-time**” perspective that Linda uses in her work and through which she discerns a “cosmic liturgy”? If so, what possibilities open up for you in your own ways of regarding what is sacred and what is simply “natural.” If not, what might it take in order for you to be able to see through her eyes? What might you gain, religiously, from such a perspective? Would you lose anything?*

5. **Fire as a sacramental.** Linda Gibler speaks of how it is possible to enrich our appreciation of the sacramental objects used in Catholic baptism by understanding **the natural science** of each. She begins with **olive oil**, then she explains that a **burning candle** is strikingly similar to the way that our own bodies turn food into heat and energy. She explains,

**When a candle burns**, what happens is the wax is melted, it goes up the wick, and it's divided into its component parts. The hydrocarbons within the wax are broken down into hydrogen and carbon. They mix with the air and they turn into carbon dioxide and water. So carbon dioxide and water are released, along with energy. **In a human cell**, every single living cell of our bodies, we bring oxygen from our lungs through our blood into our cells, and we bring nutrients through our digestive tract into our cells, where the carbohydrates and the oxygen mix. As they mix in our cells, they **burn with the very same chemical process as the candle flame, but at a slower rate**. It's only the rate that is different. They release energy, carbon dioxide, and water. **Every single cell within us burns like a candle flame.**

That's one of the beauties of making the connections between **the scientific stories and the sacred stories**. We're told never to blow that candle out. Of course, a physical candle is going to be blown out. But **the candle of the person's living body will not be blown out until her death**. So she could not blow that candle out—even if she wanted to. That talks about God's presence and her continual response. **That's what fire teaches.**

**Question 5:** *Whether or not you fully understand the science, can you sense Linda Gibler's excitement in finding ways that **modern science can amplify the meaning** of ancient rituals? And reflect **on your own learnings**: Can you recall a time (including perhaps your encounter with the episodes in this series) when **learning something in science in some way enhanced** your spiritual or emotional experience of life, or your sense of being related to Earth and the Universe?*

6. **A cosmocentric Eucharist.** Linda Gibler speaks of the (mostly Catholic) scholars who have profoundly influenced her own faith and scholarly work. She speaks of a Jesuit paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (who died in 1955), in this way:

The most beautiful piece of writing that I see in **Teilhard de Chardin** is his "**Mass on the World**." In the "Mass on the World" he talks about celebrating the **Eucharistic liturgy** without the regular elements—without the bread and wine. Instead he offers the entire Creation, in all of its suffering and all of its beauty, to God. His idea is that **the Universe itself is somehow participating in this grand cosmic liturgy**. From Teilhard's perspective, noticing that and participating in that is as important and as possible as celebrating the Eucharist with bread and wine. It's that divine contact that is always there—that God always shows us, and we can always reciprocate to God, through the Creation itself.

**Question 6:** *What is your response to Linda Gibler's description of Teilhard de Chardin's expansion of the traditional Eucharist into a cosmological celebration?*

7. **Sacrament as blessing plus response.** Linda Gibler points to a definition of “sacrament” by systematic theologian and Franciscan Kenan B. Osborn. Osborn identifies a sacrament as a twofold process, beginning with a “blessing” from God, followed by a celebratory response or honoring from the human—or any other creature, for that matter. Here is how she explains this view of sacrament:

**Thomas Berry** talks about different moments in time as **moments of grace**. Supernova explosions, things like this, are moments of grace. In a sacramental tradition, we understand moments of grace as sacramental moments. **Kenan B. Osborne**, whom I mention in the book, helped me quite a bit with this. Osborne’s definition of sacrament is “**God blesses, and there is a human response of ‘Wow!’**” God, the first person of the Trinity, blesses constantly, constantly, constantly. It doesn’t become a sacrament until there’s a response. And that happens, according to Ken, when we turn back to God and say, “Wow!”

I would move that just a step further and say (and Ken agrees with me on this) that it’s not only when a **human** turns back and says “Wow!” to God, but when **anyone of the Earth community** responds back to God. So all the way from the very beginning, 13.7 billion years ago, God has been blessing Creation, and Creation has been responding to God’s blessing. So we have this entire **sacramental liturgical reciprocity**: God blesses, and then there’s the response of Creation. That has been happening for the entire **13.7 billion years of Creation**. It continues—and perhaps deepens—with the human sacramental “Wow!” because we can look at God more fully by knowing more fully and intentionally what we’re doing. So that response to God becomes conscious and more articulate **in the human being aware of what she’s doing**.

**Question 7:** *Are you intrigued, even excited perhaps, by this **expanded understanding of what a sacrament is**? If so, how might this new understanding work its way into your life in a practical way? If not, consider some of the **natural gifts of the world for which you are grateful**. Then ponder and discuss ways in which you already do (or could) “respond” so that mindfulness of such natural blessings positively contributes to your sense of wellbeing and appreciation.*

8. **Reverence for nature.** Host Michael Dowd presses Catholic theologian Linda Gibler to speak about whether one’s religious beliefs (or nonbelief) make an actual and practical difference in how individuals go about caring for Earth. **Dowd** specifically mentions that his previous dialogues with Catholic theologians in this series have demonstrated that

. . . there is a very rapid and quick rejection of, or pull-back from, or clear delineation from, any language of **pantheism**, of **confusing the Creator with the Creation** or identifying the two and that sort of thing. I can certainly understand that, because historically people have been **burned at the stake** and killed and ex-communicated for these sorts of beliefs.

Dowd then questions Gibler as to whether a nontheist (such as a pantheist) would have any less reverence for nature and zeal for its protection than a Christian theist. **Gibler** responds,

**What motivates us**, I think, is really important when we're looking at our religious faith and our spiritual lives. So **the motivating force may end up with the same behavior, but it might come from a whole different place**. For instance, an **atheist** might clean a river because his grandchildren should be able to fish in that river. Or, more deeply, an atheist might clean a river because he recognizes that a river should be clean—that somehow it has its intrinsic rights. He might not recognize rights that come from God; it might just come from being a river.

If I clean a river, it might also be for the same reasons, but **I would say the river has rights because God created it**—and that, for some reason, God has chosen to show God's self to us *through* Creation, through things like rivers. For me, even this beautiful tree that I'm looking at—this oak tree—I wouldn't tear down its branches, because there's something about that tree that has a relationship with the divine, and that the divine is somehow present to that tree. So **I give it an extra level of respect because it belongs, in a way, to God**—and it images, in a way, God to me. Now, unlike a **pantheist**, I don't think that the tree has value simply because it's a tree. But **it has value because it is in relationship with the divine**. The divine, for me, is not completely contained in nature. There's a **transcendent** element, as well: God is present in all of Creation, but is not *contained* by Creation. So there's a deeper sense of reverence that I have for Creation, because it witnesses to the divine. I don't know if my reverence for nature is actually deeper than an atheist, because I can't speak for atheists—and some atheists do some excellent kinds of work.

**Question 8A:** *Did you find valuable Linda Gibler's response to Michael's challenging query? How or how not?*

**Question 8B:** *Is a clear distinction between **pantheism and theism** important in your own religious or heartfelt response to nature and to the ecological troubles of the world?*

**Question 8C:** *How important do you think **religious beliefs** are for how we humans interact with and care for the natural world? Are there other motivating factors that may be more important?*

9. **“Evidence” as divine guidance?** Throughout this series of dialogues, host Michael Dowd often presents for his guest to respond to a particular, somewhat radical view that he holds. As he explains here:

**God is communicating to us through evidence.** To the degree that we think that divine guidance and divine communication only happen through the tradition or through ancient scripture, we do God a disservice. We're blinded. It's almost like we're autistic. We won't be aware of what God is communicating today and how God is guiding us today if we fail to see evidence as divine communication and divine guidance—God's *word*, as it were.

Dowd also advocates this slogan, **“God is still speaking, and facts are God's native tongue.”**

**Question 9:** *Did you understand Dowd's viewpoint, that Reality (God) is revealing truth through scientific, historic, and cross-cultural evidence? And to what degree (if at all) do you share this*



*perspective? Overall, what is your response to Dowd's assertion that evidence is today's form of divine guidance?*

10. **Sacraments for service in the world.** The title given to this interview is “An Evolutionary View of Sacraments.” Indeed, at the very end of the conversation Linda Gibler challenges us to view the various sacraments of our religious traditions not so much as benefiting us as individuals but for how they might contribute to **our own desire and ability to be of service.**

The idea of sacramentally feeling good and warm and cozy and God-in-me: that's lovely. But it's not enough. **Our blessings should call us to be a blessing for someone or something else**—or to treat something with a deeper reverence, or to open our eyes more fully to the suffering that's around us in the human and in the other-than-human community. **The sacrament for the sake of self is just not enough.**

**Question 10A:** *What is your response to Linda Gibler's idea of sacraments to inspire us to serve and/or be a blessing to another, or the world?*

**Question 10B:** *What sorts of experiences or news or interactions inspire you to serve?*

11. **Bringing Nature into Catholic education and mass.** At the close of the interview, the host asks Linda Gibler a series of three questions — two of which evoke prophetically ecological responses. To the question, *If you could affect just one change in how **children** are educated religiously, what would that be?* she responds:

They would be **taken outside** when they are being introduced to the wonders of God or the nature of God. They would be introduced to it through nature, instead of inside the classroom.

To the question, *If you could **affect just one change in how the liturgies of the Catholic mass** are conducted, what would that be?* she has a two-fold response. The first is “no fake flowers.” The second is,

. . . **to include Earth and the Earth community in every celebration, so that we become as aware of the suffering planet as we are of the suffering humans.** In all of our liturgies, somewhere, we talk about God's preferential option for the poor, our need to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. I would find a way to **include the poor and the hungry of all species**—not just the human species.

**Question 11A:** *What is your response to Linda's ideas on bringing a reverence for nature more into Christian forms of worship?*

**Question 11B:** *Adapting the two questions for your own faith (or secular) tradition, what would your responses be?*