

Michael Dowd

“Evidence As Divine Communication: REALizing Faith”

Episode 38 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Michael Dowd is an itinerant evolutionary evangelist and religious naturalist. He is the author of *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*, which was endorsed by six Nobel laureates and other science luminaries, including noted skeptics, and by religious leaders across the spectrum.

HIGHLIGHTS

As Dowd explains at the outset, **“REALizing” one’s faith means reinterpreting core religious doctrines in fully this-world realistic ways.** His approach contrasts with traditional supernatural explanations, or (what Dowd calls) **“pre-natural” interpretations** — meaning, interpretations that arose before science could offer **natural explanations for the powers and calamities of nature** and before skeptical inquiry could safely **question the miracle stories** passed down through generations.

Half of the core concepts in this episode are presented as **five sequential transitions Dowd himself worked through in his own journey** of REALizing Christian faith. The five transitions are: (1) the recognition that **“evidence is divine communication”** (evidence being that which comes from scientific, historic, and cross-cultural sources); (2) **“the collapse of the two-story universe”** and the recognition that **“God is not a person** but a personification of reality”; (3) an **“expanded sense of self”** as an “expression of the universe” and thus fully related to all that is; (4) appreciating **“death as natural and generative at all levels of reality”**; and (5) “understanding that the promises of religion can’t possibly be fulfilled in this life if we don’t have **our best evidential understanding of human nature**, which is that we have **mismatched instincts** and we live in a world of **supernormal stimuli.**”

Other core concepts include: **Religions as “mythic maps of reality,” prayer** and intimacy with God (when God is understood as reality personified), a religious naturalist view of **“the problem of evil,”** and how **compassion** for self and others is effortlessly evoked when we grasp how ill-equipped human instincts are for **navigating our modern world brimming with “supernormal” temptations.**

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Because Dowd serves as host of all 37 of the prior episodes, this interview is recommended for nearly all discussion-group or classroom situations, as participants will surely become curious about what this host believes and values. The only exception would be institutional settings in which scriptural literalism is a core and unquestioned component of faith, and in which course leaders wish to protect participants from exposure to unorthodox perspectives.

Because Dowd uplifts the role of science and the value of skeptical inquiry in his depiction of himself as a “mythic naturalist” form of evolutionary Christian, secular and humanist/atheist participants will feel that their own worldviews are valued. Importantly, because Dowd takes his host role seriously in the previous episodes (and thus downplays any differences he has with the thought-leaders being interviewed), our recommendation would be to use this episode at or near the end of whatever mixture and sequencing of episodes that are ultimately chosen for your particular group.

BLOG COMMENTS

Paul Snell says:

The final interview was just extraordinary, astonishing. I commend you so very highly for your sharing. I wish that what you had to say could be put to music, dance, poetry, children's stories, and/or other kinds of stories. But, in fact, this has already happened many times over for many centuries and with more to come. One just has to look for the artistic offerings and to keep ones ears, eyes, and nose open for more.

KEYWORD TOPICS

REALize (make real) **religious concepts**, **naturalize**, **supernatural otherworldlyism** (critique of), **evidence as divine communication**, **Thomas Berry**, **grace moments**, **Pentecostal**, **“baptism in the Spirit,”** **speaking in tongues**, **Assemblies of God**, **Ian Barbour**, **Thomas Kuhn**, **Sallie McFague**, **Joanna Macy**, **Joseph Campbell**, **worldviews**, **interpreting reality**, **paradigm shift** (as traumatic), **mentors**, **Arthur Holmes**, **metaphors** (power of), **“two-story universe”** (collapse of), **God as reality personified** (not a person), **Gene Marshall**, **faith as trust**, **mythic naturalism**, **positive psychology**, **David Sloan Wilson**, **practical v. factual realism**, **personal wholeness** (as individual function of religion), **social coherence** (as group function of religion), **Loyal Rue**, **religions as mythic maps of reality**, **symbolic language**, **day and night experience**, **Benson Saler**, **pre-natural explanations** (prior to supernatural v. natural distinction), **epic of evolution**, **the new cosmology**, **Brian Swimme**, **Albert LaChance**, **Miriam MacGillis**, **expansion of self**, **humans as an expression of the universe**,

humans as the universe become conscious of itself, trajectory of evolution, Big History, awakening to evolution (stories of), **Bruce Sanguin, Mary Southard, death** (as creative in evolution), **human nature, mismatched instincts, supernormal stimuli, addictions, 12-Step programs, gratitude, witness capacity, compassion, worldview shift, prayer** (in a naturalized sense of God), **Jesus** (his relationship to God/Reality), **theodicy, faith in God** (as interpretive stance toward reality), **afterlife** (importance of trust, not belief), **Christian naturalist, scientific evidence, historical evidence, cross-cultural evidence, future of Christianity, environmental contexts** (importance of), **in-group/out-group, intention and support, growing in integrity, humility, authenticity, responsibility, service, legacy**

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Dowd is the author of *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* (Viking/Plume), a book that has been endorsed by science luminaries (including six Nobel laureates) and by noted skeptics and religious leaders across the theological spectrum. He and his wife, Connie Barlow, have spoken to more than 1,600 religious and secular groups since launching their itinerant ministry as “America’s evolutionary evangelists” in April 2002. Their venues include hundreds of Christian settings ranging from Roman Catholic to Baptist, as well as Unitarian Universalist congregations, New Thought and Religious Science churches, and Buddhist sanghas. Secular and mixed audiences include college and university students, national and regional skeptic societies, freethinkers, humanist groups, public libraries and museums, and the United Nations Values Caucus.

Michael earned a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and biblical studies at Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri, which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God. He completed a master of divinity degree at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (now Palmer Seminary) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which is affiliated with the American Baptist Church. Rev. Dowd served as a United Church of Christ minister for nine years, pastoring churches in Massachusetts, Ohio, and Michigan. His 1991 book, *EarthSpirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity* (Twenty-Third Publications) was one of the first attempts to look appreciatively at traditional, biblical Christianity from the perspective of a modern cosmology.

In 1995 Rev. Dowd began working with Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical leaders across America on social and environmental issues that were coming up for a vote in Congress, as Religious Organizer for the Washington D.C.–based National Environmental Trust. From 1997 to 2000 he headed the Portland Sustainable Lifestyle Campaign, which was the first government-funded program in the USA that was designed to produce large-scale and voluntary change in citizen behavior toward more sustainable living. In 2000 and 2001 he managed Global Action Plan’s “EcoTeam” and “Livable Neighborhood” programs in Rockland

County, New York. Rev. Dowd has served on the board of the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology, the international steering committee of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, and the United Church of Christ Network for Environmental and Economic Responsibility.

Michael and his wife are co-creators of the leading educational website supporting the “epic of evolution” / Big History movement: <http://thegreatstory.org/>. His book website is <http://thankgodforevolution.com>. Online links to audios and videos of his talks and publications can be accessed via: <http://thegreatstory.org/MD-writings.html>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEOS

68-minute video, “Michael Dowd: Darwin Day Celebration, 2011, Omaha”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Eqfvb4Mvaqk

4-minute video, “Michael Dowd: Evidential Reformation Pt. 1, Untrivializing Our Notions of God”
<http://www.youtube.com/user/thegreatstory?blend=1&ob=video-mustangbase#p/u/2/fvluixCD7SA>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones posted, here:
<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/evidence-as-divine-guidance/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **REALizing religion, naturalizing religious concepts.** In this final interview of “The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity” series, **host Michael Dowd becomes the guest.** He is interviewed by his wife and mission partner, Connie Barlow, who is the author of four popular science books at the nexus of evolution/ecology and meaning/inspiration. Dowd selected the title for this interview: “Evidence As Divine Communication: REALizing Faith.” Connie begins the interview by asking Michael to explain **what he means by the term REALizing.** Dowd answers,

In my book *Thank God for Evolution*, I used the word REALizing: capital R-E-A-L and then little i-z-i-n-g. What I mean by that is **the naturalizing—the making real in an undeniable sense.** For so many people, **religion is all about supernatural otherworldlyism.** They think of basically unnatural nouns and verbs. They think religion is all about unnatural nouns—that is, **unnatural persons, places and things**—and unnatural verbs—that is, the process of creation or the process of redemption. They think about all that stuff in unnatural ways. And so what my life actually has been about is a process of coming to REALize—that is, to *make real* in an undeniable way—these concepts that so many people think about in an unnatural or otherworldly way.

There are, I would argue, **profound negative consequences—there are extreme costs—to having an understanding of religion as primarily about an unnatural realm.** And there are profound benefits—there are amazing blessings—available to us as individuals, as families, as nations, and as a species in coming to recognize and indeed celebrate **evidence as divine communication**, evidence as divine guidance. And that **our religious traditions aren't merely about the unnatural realm, but they're about the real world—the natural realm.**

Question 1A: *Let's consider a **spectrum** for what "religion" is about — with "supernatural otherworldlyism" (using Dowd's term) on one end, and fully natural on the other. Where on the spectrum would you place what you think religion is about? And where on the spectrum would you place your own faith or worldview?*

Question 1B: *Throughout this interview, Michael Dowd **makes a case for religion being REALized and for "naturalizing" religious concepts.** Setting aside whether or not you agree with him, **does he make a good case?** That is, does he adequately support his contention that religion doesn't have to be about a supernatural God, about miracles in the past, and about an afterlife in the future? Or did you have difficulty following his argument — perhaps because of his style, or the compressed time allotted for him to speak, or because you were simply not attracted to (or perhaps even repelled by) his position? Please elaborate.*

Dowd's personal faith journey in five steps ("grace moments")

2. **Grace Moment 1: Evidence is divine communication.** Dowd explains the importance of and the steps for "REALizing faith" by using **his own faith journey as the example.** He identifies **five steps (five "grace moments")** that carried him beyond the scriptural literalism of his born-again experience as a young man. Let's take a look at each step in turn. **Step 1 takes place at an Assemblies of God college in the early 1980s**, where he was pursuing his undergraduate studies. This first "grace moment" is the recognition that God's truth is not limited to what appears in the Bible. Rather, **"evidence is divine communication."** He recalls,

It was a hugely traumatic time. What really made the difference were the biblical studies and philosophy professors at Evangel College and some of the science professors. I got to know these men and women personally. I had worshipped with them, and I had prayed with them, and I really *got* that **you could be a devoutly committed Christian and wholeheartedly embrace evidence as the way that God is communicating to us today.** In fact, the core philosophy of Evangel College (at least at that time) came out of **Arthur Holmes' book, *All Truth Is God's Truth***—that no matter *where* truth is found, no matter *how* it's found, no matter *who* finds it (whether it's an atheist or a Buddhist or a Christian or anybody else) all truth is God's truth. And that understanding helped me, plus the personal experience of men and women who were clearly as devoutly committed Christians as I was and as passionately committed to Jesus as I was, who were **fully embracing science in a way that not only didn't threaten their faith or conflict with their faith, but was in fact enriching.**

Question 2A: *How well did Dowd explain this first transition — both the substance of it and the crucial factors that enabled him to make this “traumatic” shift in his faith? What, if any, aspects remain confusing or unclear?*

Question 2B: *Is Dowd’s celebration of “evidence as divine communication” a step that you also have taken **in your own faith journey**? If so, was it a difficult step, and did you have mentors along the way? If not, what aspects of this faith shift do you find confusing, unnecessary, or unappealing?*

Question 2C: *What difference do you think it would make, individually and collectively, if millions of human beings considered scientific, historic, and cross-cultural evidence as “divine revelation” or “modern-day scripture”?*

3. Grace Moment 2: The collapse of the “two-story universe.” Dowd explains the second “grace moment” in his “REALizing” of his faith this way:

I think the next major thing for me was **a collapse of the two-story universe**, and again that happened probably from 1984 to 1986 or 1987. It was a complete collapse of the idea that there’s the natural world and then there’s the supernatural world above and outside the universe. This two-story universe: it really exploded for me—the idea that the *unnatural* is more divine, or more real, or more important than the *natural*.

Of course, **with the universe losing a supernatural facet, Dowd also had to rework his concept of God.** He recalls:

The other major influence on me at that time was **Gene Marshall** and his book, *A Primer on Radical Christianity*. He had a chapter in there titled, “[What Are We Pointing to When We Use the Word ‘God’?](#)” I read that chapter probably a dozen times, and it was a huge influence because what it did was it articulated our best theological understanding in the 20th century that the word *God* doesn’t merely point to something unnatural and unreal and mythic and imaginary up-there-out-there. But that **the word *God* is pointing to what it has always pointed to throughout human history— which is, it’s been identified with *reality*.** I learned from Gene that “**trusting God**” or having “**faith in God**” meant, from an experiential standpoint, trusting that what’s real isn’t a cosmic mistake. There’s redemption, there’s creativity at work. . . . And that’s when I really became what I would call a ***mythic naturalist***.

What I mean by the term ‘mythic naturalist’ or ‘mythic naturalism’ is, again, it’s **a one-story universe but interpreted mythically**. I mean, to interpret life mythically, individually and collectively, would have been **evolutionarily adaptive**. That is, it would have conferred an evolutionary advantage to individuals and to groups who thought mythically. If you believed as **a nation or as a group of people or as a tribe that God was on your side** and God wanted you to do x, y, or z, you would have more energy. It would make it easier for the people to try to cooperate in that endeavor.

As an **individual**, if you interpret life from a mythic standpoint, when bad things happen you interpret it not as some cosmic mistake or as God is against you or whatever—but, “Okay, **how is this situation God conspiring on my behalf?** How is this the universe conspiring on my behalf?”

How is this not a mistake? How is this perfect?” and to think this way for *whatever* is happening. And including my feelings, too: “**How is this perfect for my growth and learning?**” Just to stay with the question; you don’t even have to have an answer to the question, but it gets you to that place of **trust**. We now know through **positive psychology** that people who have an optimistic view of the world—even if that view is a delusion, even if it’s not accurate—they live **happier, more joyous lives**. And so living mythically would have been evolutionarily selected for at the individual level and at the group level.

Editor’s note: The PDF of the chapter, “What Are We Pointing to When We Use the Word God,” is at: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/god-reality.pdf>

Question 3A: *How well did Dowd explain this second transition — both the substance of it and the crucial factors that enabled him to make this shift in his faith? What, if any, aspects remain confusing or unclear?*

Question 3B: *Is Dowd’s “collapse of the two-story universe” a step that you also have taken in your own faith journey? If so, was it a difficult step, and did you have mentors along the way? If not, what aspects of this faith shift do you find confusing, unnecessary, or unappealing?*

4. **Grace Moment 3: Expansion of one’s sense of self and relatedness.** Dowd explains the third “grace moment” in his “REALizing” of his faith this way:

The third “grace moment” in my life was **when I had my sense of self expand and my sense of relatedness expand**, and my sense of my own history expand. This happened when I was introduced to the epic of evolution (or the new cosmology) of **Thomas Berry** and **Brian Swimme**. I’ve shared a little bit of this on previous conversations, so I’ll just say briefly here that **Albert LaChance introduced me to this universe story**, and **Miriam MacGillis** was one of my main mentors early on, as were **Thomas Berry** and **Brian Swimme**.

This whole understanding that “I *am* the universe”: if people do not get this, they can’t get anything else from this naturalized understanding, this REALized understanding of religion. Anybody who thinks they are separate from the universe—they don’t get it! **We are an expression of the universe**. The universe has been expanding and unfolding for billions of years. And the universe as a whole has gone from simple atoms to more complex atoms, to molecules, to more complex molecules, to creatures, to more complex creatures, to societies and more complex societies—and we’re part of that. **We are literally the universe becoming conscious of itself. And that sense of identification—that my larger body is the planet, is the universe—was the hugest of shifts for me.**

Question 4A: *Because Dowd has spoken in detail about this aspect of his faith journey on several of the previous conversations with other guests, he gives only a bare outline of it here. Nonetheless, based on what he does say, and what you may remember of his story from previous episodes, do you understand the core of what this third great transition for Dowd was about? What, if any, aspects remain confusing or unclear?*

Editor’s Note: A mystical sense of expanded self is also discussed by Dowd and guests in episode 2 (Sanguin), episode 19 (Southard), and episode 37 (Smith).

Question 4B: *Is Dowd’s expanded sense of self as “an expression of the universe” and as “the universe becoming conscious of itself” a step that you also have taken in your own faith journey? If so, was it a difficult step, and did you have mentors along the way? If not, what aspects of this faith shift do you find confusing, unnecessary, or unappealing?*

5. **Grace Moment 4: Death as natural and creative.** Dowd explains the fourth “grace moment” in his “REALizing” of his faith this way:

The fourth pivotal turning point, or grace moment, was really with you [Connie Barlow]. Travelling North America—we’ve been doing that for nine years—and it was about two years into it, that I really *got* death in a way that I had never understood it before. When you put together our best scientific understanding of death through all the different scientific disciplines—and I’m not going to go into details now, but it was a huge transformation. I began to see and feel in my gut that **death not only wasn’t a problem and humans weren’t responsible for the existence of death in the universe, but that we couldn’t have the world, the universe that we have, nor our lives...** This is the thing: every single thing that’s important to me, and important to us, is only possible because of the existence of death in the universe. And when I *got* that, it changed so many other things.

Again, because Michael has already provided, in previous episodes, details of the creative role of death, he doesn’t do it here. But, as a reminder, **here is what he said to John**

Polkinghorne on this topic, in episode 30:

We can understand, for example, that if it weren’t for **the death of stars**, there would be no Periodic Table of Elements; there would be no planets, there would be no life. If it weren’t for **the death of mountains**, there would be no healthy soil. If it weren’t for **the death of fetal cells** in the embryonic stage of development, we would all be spheres. If it weren’t for **the death of plants and animals**, there would be no food, and on and on. . . This cosmic understanding that death is no less sacred than life, to use that kind of language, that **death is natural and generative at all levels of reality:** I’ve seen how that allows people to look at the possibility and the reality of death from a different sort of place. It allows us, at least allows *me*, to **trust the process.**

Connie asks Michael to fill in **the personal side** of his grace moment number 4, so Michael talks about how this understanding of death **helped him face the prospect of his own foreshortened life when he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer** the previous year. He says,

Looking at the real possibility that **I could die in the next week or month**, from a place of **gratitude, acceptance, trust:** that all came from a completely naturalistic understanding. A naturalistic understanding—a REALized understanding—of God, a REALized understanding of my nature...**a REALized understanding of death as sacred, as holy, as necessary.** Also, a REALized understanding that my sense of self didn’t stop with my skin, a REALized understanding that my larger self continues even when I die, and a realization that this life is an incredible gift: to just be alive!

Question 5A: *How well did Dowd explain this fourth transition — both the substance of it and the crucial factors that enabled him to make this shift in his faith? What, if any, aspects remain confusing or unclear?*

Question 5B: *Is Dowd's naturalizing of and gratitude for death a step that you also have taken in your own faith journey? If so, was it a difficult step, and did you have mentors along the way? If not, what aspects of this faith shift do you find confusing, unnecessary, or unappealing?*

6. **Grace Moment 5: An evolutionary understanding of human nature.** Dowd explains the fifth and (thus far) final “grace moment” in his “REALizing” of his faith:

The last grace moment—the last real big transformation—had to do with an understanding of human nature, specifically, **our evolved nature: that we all have mismatched instincts and we're all surrounded by supernormal stimuli.** And I would go so far as to say that the promises of religion cannot and will never be fulfilled in this life, individually or collectively, until we humans get—I mean millions and millions of us really *get*—this understanding of human nature of mismatched instincts living in a world of supernormal stimuli.

This evolutionary understanding of our brain and our natures helped me several years ago (four, five years ago) to let go of the self-judgment, the condemnation—the self-condemnation—for my nature. And I've had gratitude for what I used to condemn and judge about myself; so consequently it doesn't have power over me anymore. The reason why this evolutionary psychology and brain science stuff, interpreted in a meaningful way, is so vital for this time in history is because one of the enormous costs culturally is that we as a nation, **Americans, are profoundly addicted in so many different ways.** That is, we are running patterns: we're addicted to **television**, we're addicted to **shopping**, we're addicted to **being in debt**, we're addicted to substances—**drugs, alcohol, tobacco, caffeine**— and to **video games, internet pornography**, and so much more—and news: what we call **news**. People are addicted to getting their information about what's real and what's important through corporations. Corporations are giving people what *they* want them to know about what's real and what's important. And so we're making horrible decisions.

We're not gathering collective intelligence. We're not making decisions based on collective intelligence. **Families are being ruined, relationships are being ruined, because we are clueless about our evolved nature. And even religious people mostly have a mythic understanding—as though all of their foibles and challenges are because their great great great great great grandmother ate an apple or something.**

Question 6A: *Because Dowd has spoken in detail about this aspect of his faith journey in episodes 2 and 3 of this series, he gives just a quick summary of it here. Nonetheless, based on what he does say, and what you may recall of his story from those early episodes, **do you understand the core of what this third great transition** for Dowd was about? What, if any, aspects remain confusing or unclear?*

Question 6B: *Is Dowd's **evolutionary grasp of the challenges of human nature** a step that you also have taken in your own faith journey? If so, was it a difficult step, and did you have*

mentors along the way? If not, what aspects of this faith shift do you find confusing, unnecessary, or unappealing? Note: Question 8 below amplifies on this topic.

7. **Summary of the five grace moments.** Dowd summarizes “the five grace moments in helping me to REALize, to make *real*, religion.”

The **first**, that **evidence is divine communication**, divine guidance. The **second** is the **collapse of the two-story universe** and the understanding that we’re always interpreting and that God cannot possibly be separate from, disconnected from, divorced from reality. The **third** is this **expanded sense of self** that comes with the universe story, with Big History, and an expanded sense of who I’m related to, what I’m related to—that we’re related to stars and to all other creatures and so on. The **fourth** is that **death is natural and generative at all levels of reality**. And the **fifth** is this understanding that the promises of religion can’t possibly be fulfilled in this life if we don’t have our best evidential understanding of **human nature**, which is that we have **mismatched instincts** and we live in a world of **supernormal stimuli**.

Question 7A: *Overall, what is your assessment of Dowd’s five-stage journey from scriptural literalist to, what he calls, “mythic naturalist”? And, especially, is there anything you gathered from his faith journey that helps you better understand your own — possibly even sensing the contours of what could be your own next step?*

Additional Concepts

8. **An evolutionary understanding of instinct evokes compassion.** Let’s take a more detailed look at the benefits that Dowd derives (and that he suggests others can derive) by learning that **the very instincts that served our ancient ancestors are now “mismatched”** with our modern lifestyles — especially given the plethora of “**supernormal stimuli**” that surround us. Dowd explains,

What this perspective does is it has allowed me to have **gratitude for my evolved nature**. It’s like **the witness capacity** that many people in meditation traditions talk about: being able to witness their feelings, to witness their thoughts, to witness their inner experience. And when you’re able to witness it, it doesn’t have control over you in the same ways—or at least it’s possible that it doesn’t. That was definitely the case for me. I mean, I’ve shared on several of these conversations about being able to **notice my thinking, my evolved thinking, around substances or attractive women or whatever—and just notice it, and then have humor, have lightness about it**. In fact my son, Shane, who I’m in close communication with around this, he sent me an email literally yesterday because I had asked him and his girlfriend to watch my *Evolutionize Your Life* program, the first half-hour, which is on evolutionary psychology and brain science. And he sent me this email. He said,

“The main thing that struck me watching the first half-hour of your *Evolutionize Your Life* program was when you were talking about the fact that the way we are has taken millions of years to develop, refine, and ingrain. This struck me because I thought about the times when I seem to be acting on autopilot or in an involuntary way. And **when I**

realized that the universe has been conspiring to make me exactly that way for millions of years, it was easy to have compassion for myself. Now, what I'm excited about even further is understanding all the ways in which these unchosen moments of mine make complete evolutionary sense. And I can recognize those moments more easily and quickly and have compassion and humor for myself and others."

Question 8: *Both elder and younger Dowd credit an evolutionary understanding of human instincts with helping them have compassion for self and others. Michael also mentions the ability it gives him to "witness," rather than simply be led by or deny, troublesome urges. To what extent do you find this evolutionary path attractive in these ways? And where might you have some reticence? Overall, is the concept of "mismatched instincts, surrounded by supernormal stimuli" something you wish to learn more about?*

Editor's note: You can watch Michael Dowd's half-hour video, "Evolutionize Your Life" at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loBx1Xd2m-M>

9. Religions as "mythic maps of reality." In his quest to REALize religion — to naturalize religious concept — Dowd also has come to appreciate the practical functions that religions have served. He explains,

The major transitions as I see them—certainly, in biological and human evolution—can be seen as **transformations in how information regarding what's real and what's important is shared and stored.** These two questions: *What's real?* and *What's important?* or in the words of philosopher of religion Loyal Rue, **How things are and which things matter**, have been the fundamental questions not only of all cultures but I'd say, really, of all life forms. That's what all life forms concern themselves with. I mean, obviously, they don't phrase it in words. But without an accurate understanding of the nature of reality and how to live in right relationship to reality, you or your culture wouldn't survive. So from a naturalized perspective, I began to see that **all religions are mythic maps of reality.** That is, they're maps of what's real and what's important that facilitate individual and social wellbeing. There's not a religion anywhere in the world that isn't a map of how things are and which things matter, and that, when followed, leads to **personal wholeness and social coherence.**

Question 9A: *Have you previously thought about **the practical functions of religious traditions** in contributing to, what Dowd and philosopher of religion Loyal Rue call, "personal wholeness" and "social coherence"? To what extent do you consider that functional line of inquiry to be interesting and useful?*

Question 9B: *One foundational understanding of biological evolution is that **when conditions change, a species will need to adapt** genetically or behaviorally. To what extent does (or should) this apply to religions, as the cultural context changes?*

Question 9C: *Think of an example of a religious tenet or practice that seems to have lagged in evolving to adequately meet changed conditions? What negative effect does it*

have on (a) personal wholeness of those who must abide by it, and (b) social coherence of that particular group of religious adherents?

Question 9D: Consider the religious tenet or practice that you focused on in the previous question. **What is preventing cultural evolution** from adapting that tenet or practice to make it more in step with the times?

10. **Supernatural is pre-natural.** In his quest to REALize religion — to naturalize religious concept — Dowd also has come to appreciate the practical functions that religions have served. He explains,

Ancient stories of miraculous deeds, superhuman feats, or otherworldly ages and events aren't supernatural; they're pre-natural. Such explanations came into use long before we had a natural, factual understanding of anything. An example that I sometimes use is: Imagine living five hundred years ago, and without using supernatural-sounding language, **try to explain epilepsy or serious infection, or how the Himalayas came into existence**, or how the sun moves across the sky. Good luck! We can't do that without using supernatural-like language or supernatural-sounding language. In fact, here's a quote from the preface of my book, *Thank God for Evolution*:

How is the world made? Why do **earthquakes, tornados, and other bad things** happen? Why must we **die**? Why do different peoples answer these questions in different ways? The big questions that children have always asked, and will continue to ask, cannot be answered by the powers of human perception alone. **Ancient cultures gave so-called supernatural answers to these questions, but those answers weren't truly supernatural. They were pre-natural.** Prior to advances in technology and scientific ways of testing truth claims, factual answers were simply unavailable. It wasn't just difficult to understand infection before microscopes brought bacteria into focus. It was impossible. **Without an evolutionary worldview, it is similarly impossible to understand ourselves, our world, and what is required for humanity to survive.**

Question 10A: Michael insists that the opposite of “natural” is not supernatural but “pre-natural.” Standing in his shoes, why do you think he regards this distinction as important?

Question 10B: Now, standing in your own shoes, do YOU think this distinction is important? Please elaborate.

11. **What is prayer, if God is a personification of reality?** Given that Dowd no longer thinks of “God” as a supernatural being, how does that shift his understanding and experience of prayer? He explains,

When I made that shift—that God is a sacred name, a mythic name for reality, or that reality is a secular name for God—**prayer became a radically different thing for me.** The analogy that I've used many times is, like nesting dolls: Russian nesting dolls of increasing complexity and creativity (subatomic particles within atoms, within molecules, within cells, within organisms, within planets, within galaxies and so on). God for me now—

communicating with God—is, **How do I communicate to reality? How do I intimately relate to reality?**

Here's something that I think a lot of Christians don't get, which is that **Jesus did not believe in a personal God**. Jesus didn't believe in God at all. *He related to reality personally* with the intimacy of a Father and Son. So recognizing that *God* is a sacred name for reality, **I have an intimate, personal relationship to God—more so than when I literally thought God was limited to human personality traits**, human personality characteristics. And I don't know how to explain that to people, but it's really true.

I've said it humorously in a number of these conversations: that I have a personal relationship with this continent as "**Nora**." Connie and I have a personal relationship that we give to *our* relationship; we call our relationship "**Jasmine**." There's Michael, there's Connie, and then there's Jasmine. Jasmine is the sacred name and the proper name for *us*—for *we*. And for me, **God is a sacred name, a proper name, for reality—a mythic name for reality**. I would argue that God has *never* been less than that!

And so **how do I commune with reality?** It's like a **cell in communion** with the very body of which it's a part. So for me, **prayer** is an intimate thing. I have an intimate personal relationship to God that I don't think people can get if they think that they're separate from the universe, if they think they're separate from nature, or if they think that God is somehow disconnected from the reality that science is helping us to also learn about.

Question 11A: Whether and how one thinks of "God" tends to be one of those watershed understandings that is **so deep and emotionally significant** that to think in any other way seems almost impossible. Philosophers call this kind of divide "**incommensurable**." Michael acknowledges this incommensurability when he says, "I don't know how to explain that to people, but it's really true." *So the first question is, to what extent are you able to stand in Michael's shoes and sense how the act of prayer could actually be more intimate for him, now that God, for him, is a mythic name for that which is inescapably, undeniably real? Please elaborate.*

Question 11B: *To the extent you feel comfortable in discussing this topic, what does "prayer" mean to you, and is it a practice that you sometimes or regularly engage in? If you do not engage in prayer, is there something else that you do — even if only very rarely — that probably offers similar emotional benefits?*

Question 11C: *Is there any aspect of your life or your relationships where you have created a personal name for something important to you that is clearly not a person? If you have engaged in this practice of personification, try to describe the benefits you derive from it. If you cannot think of a current instance, see if you can recall having engaged in personification as a child — and how did this practice benefit you back then?*

12. **The problem of evil.** Dowd gives a very brief summary of how his naturalized understanding of God solves "the problem of evil" for him. He then reinterprets "faith in God" accordingly. He says,

With respect to **theodicy**, **the problem of evil completely evaporates** when one gets this understanding of *God as reality* because you are no longer thinking, *How could a loving God allow for x, y, or z tragedy in the world to happen?* You don't think mythically in that way; you think mythically in terms of *naturally*. It's like, of course earthquakes happen, of course tornados happen, of course tsunamis happen, of course people go through suffering!

My understanding is that **“faith in God” is an interpretive stance toward reality**. That whatever happens, I interpret it as, *How can this be a contribution to my life? How can this be a contribution to the universe? How can this be a contribution to our world?* It's an interpretive stance.

Question 12A: *When you **hear of something really terrible happening** in the world, to what extent does a core part of you wonder the equivalent of, “How could God let this happen?” What about when something really terrible happens to you or to someone you love? If the “problem of evil” thus comes up for you in response to terrible events, what happens to your sense of God in such instances? If, on the other hand, you don't look for “God's purpose” or “God's action” in the events of the world, do you recall whether you ever did? If so, what happened to your sense of God during calamitous times?*

Question 12B: *To what extent does Dowd's solution to the “**theodicy**” problem seem **reasonable** to you? And to what extent is it **emotionally satisfying**?*

Question 12C: *Focus now on Dowd's statement that, for him, “**faith in God is an interpretive stance toward reality**” and especially on his practice of asking, “How can this be a contribution to my life / the universe?” when something bad happens. Discuss your responses and reactions to these statements by Dowd.*

13. **What happens on the other side of death?** Dowd applies his faith stance very directly to the question of what happens when we die. He asserts,

To my mind, any supposed “faith in God” that doesn't include **trusting that whatever happens on the other side of death is just fine**, is really no faith at all. I'm sure I've shared this on other conversations. Fear of a hellish after-death scenario, or hope of a blissful after-death scenario, are just that: **fear or hope—not faith, not trust**. So for me, “trusting reality” is a way of saying “faith in God.” And I trust that whatever happens on the other side of death is just great! And no, I don't think that *I* continue—little, small-me Michael continues. **I'm cherishing this life as the one chance I get—and I also know that my larger self does continue**. My faith is in reality; my faith is in God. I don't know quite what to say beyond that.

Question 13A: *Belief, fear, and hope about what may or may not happen after death is another emotionally charged issue in which “**incommensurability**” easily blocks our ability to hear and understand a differing perspective. Nonetheless, stepping into Michael's shoes for a moment, **can you comprehend how his perspective could be emotionally satisfying** for him?*

Question 13B: *To what degree have you wrestled with the fact of death and any beliefs you may have about what, if anything, follows? And to what extent have you arrived at an emotionally satisfying stance toward death? Or do you sense that you have more work to do, and perhaps more experience to acquire, before you will arrive at a level of comfort similar to what Michael has achieved?*

14. **Dowd's "take-home message."** At the close of the interview, the host, Connie Barlow, asks Michael, "What's the most important thing you want to leave our listeners with?" He responds,

Since I'm sharing this in a Christian context, speaking to Christians and speaking as a Christian, as a Christian naturalist, I think what I'd like to do is offer that **my deepest desire for the Christian faith**, and for Christian individuals, is that **we all embrace scientific evidence, historical evidence, and cross-cultural experience** (and the evidence that comes from that) as God's Word—as divine revelation.

To the degree that we continue to identify our tradition and the important concepts and **doctrines and insights of our tradition with un-naturalism, and we think of them in primarily unnatural ways, I think we're going to suffer**. We're going to continue to see the Church shrink. And I think we're going to continue to see individual Christians struggling and having all kinds of doubts and fears and uncertainty.

So I think in closing I'd like to say that, as best I can tell, there are **four things that determine the quality of our relationship to God**. And it's not what we believe. It's not being part of the right tradition. It's not doing the right rituals. The four things as I see them are:

(1) The first is **YOUR ENVIRONMENT**. What feeds you? What feeds you physically, emotionally, and intellectually—like, what do you read? What do you watch? What do you listen to? What are your sources of pleasure? Where do you get your dopamine hits? How do you listen to God? How do you listen to what's real? How do you bring it in? And so I see that **the first thing is environmental**.

(2) The second thing has to do with **HOW WE THINK AND INTERPRET**: What's our mental software? How do we interpret reality? How do we think about reality? **Is our thinking aligned with reality or not? Are our interpretations generous or stingy?** Are they empowering or disempowering? . . . How do we think about **human nature**? How do we think about in-group and out-group? How do we think about conflict and chaos? How do we think about **death**? How do we think about **divine guidance**? Where does that come from? So our interpretations, our mental software, what we think: those determine the quality of our life and the quality of our relationship to God.

(3) The third has to do with **INTENTION AND SUPPORT**—like, Are we committed to growing in integrity? Are we committed to growing in Christ-likeness, Christ-centeredness (to use traditional religious language)? Are we growing in humility, authenticity, responsibility, service?

(4) And then finally, what's our **LEGACY**? How are we serving the world? How are we being a blessing to others?

I see those things: our **environment**, our **thinking and interpretation**, how we **relate to our own instincts**, and what kind of a **legacy** we're leaving. Those, to my mind, are what right relationship to God is all about. My hope and prayer is that we wholeheartedly, fully **embrace an evidential understanding** and allow that to completely transform our religious understandings and our religious life, based on what God is revealing through evidence.

Question 14A: *Michael Dowd packs a lot of ideas into his final statement. Which of his ideas would you most like to remember and perhaps bring into your own faith experience in some way? Please elaborate.*

Question 14B: *Taking the interview as a whole, what is the most important thing you would like to remember — and why?*

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