

## Karl Giberson

# “The Heart and Soul of the Evolution Controversy”

Episode 5 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com

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**Karl Giberson** is a noted science-and-religion scholar who teaches at Eastern Nazarene College. He was one of the founders of the BioLogos Foundation, a think-tank helping evangelicals integrate faith with science, and the author, with Francis Collins, of *The Language of Science & Faith: Straight Answers to Genuine Questions*. (He left BioLogos six months after this interview was recorded.)

### HIGHLIGHTS

This is a **superb inside look** at the challenges facing scientists and scholars who dedicate their careers to **helping move their fellow Evangelicals** toward a worldview stance that embraces **an ancient universe and evolutionary processes**. It is also one of a half dozen in this series that explores the theological (as well as scientific) arguments **against the “Intelligent Design” movement**. Through personal story, one gains an inside look at the emotional consequences (and release) of **transitioning out of a literalistic view** of biblical faith, and the **importance of trusted mentors** for assistance in moving through this process. The **“two books” approach to embracing both scripture and science** is the foundation of Giberson’s approach. As well, the **“allure of the cosmic narrative”** is shown to be something that offers a strong draw for detaching from scriptural literalism and fully embracing what the sciences have to offer.

### SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Highly recommended for all audiences, especially Evangelicals—and also for theologically liberal or secular groups who could benefit from a more nuanced understanding of where Evangelicalism is open to the fruits of scientific discovery. It is also highly recommended for those who aspire to build bridges on any topic, and who therefore must find the strength to carry on despite harsh criticism from both ends of a spectrum. Because mentors played very significant roles in the faith transitions of both Karl Giberson and the host, Michael Dowd, three sets of questions in the study guide encourage discussants to review the role of mentors in

their own lives, to consider ways in which they might mentor others, and to speak from personal experience and use storytelling when given the opportunity to guide others.

## BLOG COMMENT

Dana Coons says:

I found the conversation between Michael Dowd and Karl Giberson thought-provoking, educational and extremely relevant. Listening to this conversation was reassuring; one can take comfort in the fact that there is a large group of Christians between faith-rejecting atheists and science-rejecting creationists who have broken down the barrier between science and religion. As Giberson said, there are people who are Christian and fully embrace science. One can accept evolution without abandoning faith.

Giberson discussed how Christians grow up with a narrow and literal interpretation of the *Genesis* story of creation that they have to wrestle with as young adults. I could not agree more. This personally resonated with me because I believe that is something I have come to struggle with in my life as a young adult. Growing up in the Catholic school system, it wasn't until the beginning of my post-secondary education that I began to question how science and religion could be reconciled. Coming to the understanding that evolution can be understood in a God-respecting and theological way truly deepened my faith.

What I found particularly interesting in this conversation was the notion that science and religion do not just simply tolerate each other; rather they are interconnected. Giberson explained how science is one way that God reveals truth, and when we find out something true about the world, that truth is sacred. This leads to revelation and a deeper understanding of science enhanced by God.

## KEYWORD TOPICS

**BioLogos Foundation**, **biblical literalism** (the trauma of leaving behind), **evangelical colleges** (that teach evolution), **Francis Collins**, **mentors** (importance of during faith transitions), **Young Earth creationism** (as the still-dominant perspective within evangelicalism), **personal stories** (as more effective than rational arguments), **Aristotle** (“social transmission of knowledge”), **genetics** (as support for evolution), **Templeton Foundation**, **Darrell Falk**, **Intelligent Design** (criticism of), **separation of church and state** (criticism of), the **“cosmic narrative”** (as our shared creation story), **“celebrity scientists”** (critique of), **Carl Sagan**, **Big Bang**, **End Times** (criticism of), **God as creator** (scientifically aligned concepts of), **stardust** (as synonym for atoms), **Ken Ham** (criticism of), **Creation Museum**, **interpretation** (importance of), **Galileo** (his “two books” quote), **Arthur Holmes**, **deep time**, **Thomas Berry** (his “Earth jurisprudence”), **Susan Haack**, **Eugenie Scott**, **National Center for Science Education**, **Richard Dawkins**,

**Stephen Jay Gould, New Atheists, Charles Darwin** (faith journey of), **John Polkinghorne, David Barton, Albert Mohler, Jerry Coyne**

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Karl Giberson** teaches science and religion, and directs the honors program at Eastern Nazarene College. He is one of the leading scholarly voices in America's ongoing controversy over evolution. He has published over two hundred articles, reviews, and essays, both technical and popular, and written seven books: *Worlds Apart: The Unholy War Between Science and Religion* (1993); *Species of Origins: America's Search for a Creation Story* (2002, with Don Yerxa); *Oracles of Science: Celebrity Scientists Versus God and Religion* (2007 with the late Mariano Artigas); *Saving Darwin: How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* (2008); *The Language of Faith and Science: Straight Answers to Genuine Questions* (2011, with Francis Collins); *Quantum Leap: How John Polkinghorne Found God in Science and Religion* (2011, with Dean Nelson); and *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (2011, with Randall Stephens).

In addition to blogging regularly at the *Huffington Post*, Giberson has written for *Salon.com*, *Discover*, *Perspectives on Science & Faith*, *Books & Culture*, *Quarterly Review of Biology*, *Weekly Standard*, *Christianity Today*, *Zygon*, *USA Today*, *CNN.com* and other journals. He writes and speaks widely about all aspects of the creation–evolution controversy. Giberson helped found the BioLogos Foundation with Francis Collins and served as its president until 2010. BioLogos is a think tank aimed at helping Christians integrate their faith with contemporary science. He was the founding editor of *Science & Theology News*, the leading publication in the field until it ceased publication in 2006, and editor-in-chief of *Science & Spirit* magazine from 2003-2006. His book *Saving Darwin* was recognized by the Washington Post Book World as “one of the best books of 2008.” His work has appeared in several languages, and his book *Oracles of Science* has been translated into Italian, Spanish, and Polish.

His personal/professional website: <http://www.karlgiberson.com/>

## **SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO**

Karl Giberson in a 3-minute video by BioLogos, then 30-minute on Vimeo:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHwsgDB-fUE>

<http://vimeo.com/9838536>

## **SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE**

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

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/karl-giberson-the-heart-soul-of-the-evolution-controversy/>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Losing literalism at evangelical colleges.** Both Karl Giberson and the host, Michael Dowd, recount their stories of losing their literalistic approaches to Christian faith in the course of their education at evangelical colleges. Giberson says,

I was raised in rural New Brunswick in a fundamentalist Baptist parsonage. I was expecting to spend my life fighting against evolution and the evil men that preach it as the, sort of, gospel of atheism, and went off to an evangelical college in Boston, expecting that those beliefs would be affirmed there. But what I found instead was that, **with a good liberal arts training, most of that anti-intellectual fundamentalism disappears along the way.** And so, I gradually became convinced that I needed to come to terms with evolution, and I did so in the context of having Christian professors and friends and a supportive family. So I made that transition to accept evolution **without abandoning my faith**, but it required a lot of rather dramatic—and sometimes even traumatic—rethinking of some of the things I'd been taught growing up.

**Question 1A:** *Were you surprised to learn that evangelical colleges can be a locus for shedding literalistic understandings of the Bible?*

**Question 1B:** *Giberson mentions that his shift out of biblical literalism “required a lot of rather dramatic—and sometimes even **traumatic**—rethinking of some of the things I'd been taught growing up.” Does his story (and that of others in this series) suggest why it is important for Evangelicals who embrace evolution to be the purveyors of evolutionary understanding to their peers—and why encounters with “just the facts” of evolution, as in **high school biology class**, can be ineffective and even off-putting?*

**Question 1C:** *What role do you think churches should play in **religious education of children and youth** for preparing them to accept (or even embrace) evolution without losing faith?*

**Question 1D:** *If you are part of a church community, **what role can you play** in mentoring children and youth to make this transition in healthy ways?*

2. **The importance of role models.** Both Giberson and Dowd attribute their journeys beyond literalism not just to ideas and learning but to professors who served as role models for how one could cease looking upon the Bible as a science book or a history book and yet still be faithfully Christian. And Giberson talks about how he himself, as a college professor, is now playing that role for evangelical students. **Karl** says:

So much of this goes back to what Aristotle used to talk about—with what he called the “**social transmission of knowledge**.” It's very easy for academics to lose sight of that, because we tend to think of ourselves as being skeptical and as demanding arguments and reasons that are disembodied. We forget that the natural way that humans communicate is through other humans. Normally, humans spend a lot of time thinking about whether or not we can trust someone: Do we think they would mislead us? Do they seem to be honest? I think it's so important for people to be

able to **study under somebody that they feel they can trust**—to know that there's no agenda this person has to destroy one's faith, or faith in general, or to undermine the connection with one's family in any way.

Similarly, **Dowd** recalls his own shedding of biblical literalism during college:

I was telling somebody a couple months ago, when they asked **how I made that shift**, and I said it wasn't an argument that did it. I wasn't *convinced* in any kind of rational argument. It was meeting people who, clearly, were deeply Christian—in the best sense of that term—who had fully embraced science and didn't see a conflict [between faith and reason]. Most of quality education throughout human history has been **mentoring**. It's been someone older, more experienced, taking someone younger and less experienced under his or her wing and guiding them. So the relationship was foundational—before the rational knowledge occurred or the skill set was developed.

**Question 2A:** *Where in your own faith journey did a role model or mentor play a crucial role in helping you? ( Note: Role models can also be authors whom you encounter in books or other media, but whom you never meet.)*

**Question 2B:** *Do you think you have served as a role model for others—and in what ways?*

**Question 2C:** *Is being a role model something that someone can actively aspire to and go out of their way to behave as such? Please give an example, if you can.*

**Question 2D:** *Has anyone ever told you that you were an important role model or mentor for them? And have you taken the initiative to expressly thank those who have served as role models for you? If not, are you inspired by the prospect of doing so? Please elaborate.*

3. **Sharing one's own experience.** Karl Giberson explains how he mentors students at his college. He says, "What I usually start out with is I talk about my own experience."

**Question 3A:** *If personal experience, rather than solely conceptual expertise, is so important for serving as an effective role model, in what areas might you serve as important role model? And where might you be limited—despite your enthusiasm for a topic?*

**Question 3B:** *Can you recall a time when you began an important shift or inquiry based largely (or solely) on a powerful encounter you had with someone else's **personal experience** (either directly hearing it or reading of it in a book)? If so, please share something about that.*

**Question 3C:** *Can you think of ways in which **you might be of service**—simply by offering to tell your own story of a significant transition in your life?*

4. **The importance of storytelling.** It is one thing to share one's personal experience, as Giberson does throughout this interview. It is quite another to share it in the most poignant and memorable way of all: **personal story**. He prefaced his storytelling with this statement:

The older I get and the longer I live with [a scientific] way of thinking (which is so different from the way I was brought up), the more profound it seems to me. **I really like the sense of being connected to all of creation as a grand unity**, and I find it to be very meaningful to think about what we share with the rest of the world. At the very end of my book *Saving Darwin*, I tell **the story of taking a canoe ride with my daughter** on a lake called Indian Lake in the middle of nowhere in rural New Brunswick, Canada.

**Question 4A:** *If someone important to you was having a crisis of faith or was tottering on the edge of a seemingly necessary transition in views or beliefs, and if that person came to you for support, do you have a repertoire of personal stories to draw upon from your own life experience? Which of those stories is perhaps your most powerful story—and the one you would most like to share?*

**Question 4B:** *If you agree that storytelling is a crucial mode of communication, what steps could you take to (a) increase your ability to quickly pull a story out of your hat, and (b) ramp up your skills in how you deliver it?*

5. **Critique of Intelligent Design: Part 1 – Leaving God out.** Giberson criticizes the Intelligent Design movement for having its **origin in politics**. He says,

When Young Earth creationism was ruled unconstitutional and not something that was ever going to make it into the public schools, that collection of ideas had to be repackaged. Intelligent Design is different in many ways from Young Earth creationism, but shares a common ancestor, so to speak. It is an attempt to get these anti-evolutionary arguments into the public schools, to try to get this other way of thinking about origins taught alongside evolution. So, in an effort to get past the barrier of **the separation of church and state** and make their way into the public schools, they had to secularize what they were doing.

Karl then goes on to contrast that approach with the way that he and the BioLogos organization carries out its bridge-building work:

But the separation of church and state has, for better or worse, made it so that if you want to have something in the public schools, it can't smack of religion at all. So the Intelligent Design people, who are almost all conservative Christians (and personally what they're interested in is getting on the table that God is the creator and meaningfully involved in origins): they want to get that into the public schools, but they can't. So they take the whole thing **and pull out the God part**. I think that creates the most important distinction between BioLogos and Intelligent Design: **we're leaving the God part in**. We think that's where the conversation is. This is not about whether evolution is an adequate theory or not. That's in the background—and we wouldn't be doing what we're doing if we didn't think evolution was an adequate theory—but that's not where the conversation is. The conversation is, **Can we embrace evolution and still be authentically evangelical?** That's where the conversation is, and the Intelligent Design people can't have that conversation, because they don't bring God in. So that's a very big difference.

**Question 5:** *The BioLogos Foundation is able to chart a mid-ground position in the religion vs. science conflict because their focus is not to shift how evolution is taught in public schools but to shift how Evangelicals—in or out of school—interpret their religion. So the question is, in what ways do you appreciate what BioLogos is doing? Where, if at all, do you have hesitation?*

6. **Critique of Intelligent Design: Part 2 – Critical of science.** A **second problem** that Giberson has with the Intelligent Design movement is,

. . . the fact that the **Intelligent Design literature is really quite critical of science**. When you see science discussed in terms of how the community behaves, what its fundamental values are, how it works, it's often portrayed very negatively. Now they like to call themselves strongly pro-science, and of course you would *have* to say that or your ideas would never have a chance of getting into the public schools. But if you actually read what they write, they talk about how evolution is widely accepted because of the assumption of naturalism—not because it has any evidence to support it. Well, this is a very negative perspective that **impugns the integrity of the scientific community**. The **peer review** process is not respected by the Intelligent Design people as a way to ensure that only the best results make it into print. The peer review process is a way to *prevent* new ideas from getting a hearing: that's how they talk about it.

Karl then contrasts how the evangelicals at BioLogos regard the scientific endeavor in its present form. He says,

At BioLogos, we want to do just the opposite. We want to talk about science as being a wonderful enterprise, that we live in this amazing world, that God created this world, and it's sort of **a worship experience to study it and to dig into it**. We want people to be able to celebrate that, and to recognize that the scientific community is not a collection of charlatans who are just perpetuating some atheistic myth about origins, and *that's* why we take evolution seriously. Rather, we are a community of **people with integrity** who are trying our very best to understand the world that God created—and this is what we have discovered about it, and it's wonderful. We want to share that in a constructive and positive way, and make people who are Christians think, “Oooh! I'd like to *be* a scientist.”

**Question 6A:** *What has been your own implicit understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of **the way science is actually done**? And did Giberson's description of how BioLogos regards science shift your view in any way? Please elaborate.*

**Question 6B:** *Dowd responded to Giberson's explanation by quoting from the late astronomer (and science celebrity) **Carl Sagan**. Sagan said, “**Science is at least in part informed worship**.” Giberson concurs. What is your response to that quotation? Please elaborate.*

7. **Critique of “Celebrity Scientists.”** Near the end of the interview, Giberson talks about his books, including, very briefly, one published in 2007 by Oxford University Press and titled *Oracles of Science: Celebrity Scientists Versus God and Religion*. As he explains the book here, **most people assume that science conflicts with religion** because this is the implicit

view put forth by, what he calls, the “celebrity scientists.” Karl laments that,

If people simply encounter science in our culture in the common way that millions of people do, they're going to have some idea of what the scientific community is like. And that idea is going to be determined by listening to people like **Richard Dawkins, E. O. Wilson, Steven Weinberg, Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking, and Stephen Jay Gould**. We picked those six in the book and said, these are the people that shaped the English-speaking world's view of the scientific community. We called them “**the oracles of science**.” They're celebrities, and they paint a picture of science that is very alienating to religious people.

**Question 7A:** *Have you read, watched, or in any other way encountered the ideas of the so-called celebrity scientists? Have any of them (or other scientists) dramatically **increased your appreciation for the natural world** and your place in it? Do you recall feeling attracted to or repelled by any of their extensions into the realm of meaning? Please elaborate.*

**Question 7B:** *Would it be possible for a scientist to write a best-selling book that did not actually **extend into the realm of meaning**? If readers are hungry for meaningful interpretations of the discoveries of science, what responsibility does the celebrity scientist bear to clarify where the science ends and his or her own **meaningful extensions** begin? [“Her” is used in this question because, surely, Jane Goodall would be regarded as a celebrity scientist too—but her writings, apparently, do not intrude on religious belief.]*

8. **The allure of the “cosmic narrative.”** Giberson and Dowd both speak of their attraction for, what Karl calls “the cosmic narrative,” and which Dowd refers to elsewhere in this series as **Big History**, the **Epic of Evolution**, or the **Great Story**. Karl says,

Having taught astronomy for many years, I'm simultaneously aware of how our planet got to be where it is, how the material in our bodies was once stardust, how habitable zones form around certain types of stars, how the Big Bang produces the cosmos and the galaxies and so on. You **look at that whole picture, and it's so amazing!** It's this incredible cosmic narrative that goes from the Big Bang to the present to where the future will be, which we don't know—and, yet, here we are. We're a part of this unfolding story, and we're *connected* to it. And that's a very deeply theological way to view our human presence.

**Question 8A:** *Do you feel the **allure of this “cosmic narrative”** the way that Karl does? If yes, are you excited about the prospects of continuing to deepen your knowledge of, and feed your fascination with, this story of the universe? If no, which aspects turn you away, and why?*

**Question 8B:** *These evolutionary Christians and other enthusiasts of the cosmic narrative obviously find great meaning, and even grow their faith, within this new story. Whether or not you share their appreciation for it, have you at least encountered this narrative well enough to sense how **it really is our common creation story**? If not, if you were given an opportunity to hear more about it in story form, would that be something you would welcome into your life? Why or why not?*

**Question 9B:** *How might your experience of the “cosmic narrative” be different today if Giberson had been your Sunday school teacher—and if he really did follow through on his wish that, “every Christian kid could grow up with that grand picture”?*

10. **End Times critique.** In talking about why the “cosmic narrative” has become so meaningful, and so theologically rich for him, Giberson says,

For me, the scientific narrative is much more meaningful than thinking that somehow God made all of this creation separate from us, and then he placed us in it, **like little figures in a diorama**, and to be (sort of) temporarily present—to look after it for a few years, and then **he will reach into the diorama and pull us out when the time is right**. The picture of being *connected*, I think, is much richer theologically. So that's how my work has made my faith, in many ways, profoundly deeper.

**Question 10:** *Did you appreciate Karl's theological perspective in that statement? And what did you think of **the End Times imagery** he used to make his point: that of God reaching into a diorama?*

11. **Focusing on evidence.** The main theological point that **Dowd** makes in this conversation is one that he is best known for in his other works. He says,

My own approach to it is that **scientific evidence, historical evidence, and cross-cultural evidence reveal divine communication**—divine guidance. I talk about in my book that “**facts are God's native tongue**, and evidence is the main way that God is speaking to humanity today.” My hope, my prayer, my wish is that *that* perspective will help bring about a new reformation. . . My hope is that we are in the early stages of what could be seen as an “**evidential reformation**,” where we see that God didn't stop communicating all the important truths back in biblical times, but is also faithfully revealing truth today. **Every fact discovered by science is also a revelation of God**. God is revealing the nature of reality. I'm hoping that this perspective can make a difference in the evolution of Christianity..

**Question 11A:** *Notice that Dowd is not just extolling science, but rather **evidence**—and evidence that is discovered in three distinct ways: scientific evidence, historical evidence, and cross-cultural evidence. This series is mostly looking at scientific evidence, but what would be an example of “**historical evidence**” that you have already brought into your perspective—and that is not acquired simply by reading the Bible?*

**Question 11B:** *What about an example from the domain of “**cross-cultural evidence**”?*

**Question 11C:** *How far do you feel comfortable in following Dowd in his assertion that “God didn't stop communicating all the important truths back in biblical times, but is also faithfully revealing truth today. Every **fact** discovered by science is also a revelation of God. God is revealing the nature of reality.” Does this perspective inspire or help you? Or is there something unsettling about it? Please elaborate.*

12. **Sacred truth and the “two books.”** Giberson says,

You've got to recognize that **when you find out something that's true about the world, that truth is a sacred truth.** It's a fact about the world. It's something which God knows is true—that in most understandings of the way that God interacts with his creation, this is now a **revelation**, because we have found something that is characteristic of the world that God created. And so we have to say, we accept this.

Karl also points to **Galileo's** understanding that there are “two books” to study for knowledge of God—the Bible and the book of Nature.

**Question 12A:** *Where do you find your own **sources of truth along the two-books spectrum**? Do you agree with the Young Earth creationists that the Bible is primary on all matters, and thus scientific and historical discoveries can only be correct if they match biblical accounts of creation and history? Or, do you believe that both “books” are equal—or perhaps equal but divided in some way? Or do you regularly regard Bible passages and stories as metaphor—and thus will always bow to the discoveries of science and history? Or, do you no longer look to the Bible for any sort of ultimate truth?*

**Question 12B:** *[Note: Giberson himself contributed this question for discussion] Many Christians are quite uneasy about proposals that **Adam and Eve** were not historical characters. Given that the evidence is strongly against that possibility, what do you think is really lost by giving up the historicity of that famous couple? After all, **sin** is very much a reality, no matter what we think about how it originated. Do we really need for sin to originate with Adam and Eve? And is it okay that **St. Paul** thought Adam was a real person—even though he wasn't?*

13. **Karl Giberson's role.** In various places in this conversation series, host Michael Dowd emphasizes the importance of taking, what he calls, an “ecosystems approach” to valuing a diversity of ways of contributing to the science-and-religion dialogue.

**Question 13:** *Setting aside, for the moment, your own position on Christianity, evolution, and how the two dance together or apart, are you grateful that Karl Giberson and the Biologos Foundation have emerged as active players? Why or why not?*

14. **“Jesus would believe in evolution and so should you.”** In April 2011 (4 months after this dialogue was recorded), Karl Giberson posted an invited opinion piece on the CNN website, titled, “Jesus would believe in evolution and so should you.” Within two days it generated more than 3,000 comments. He concludes his essay this way:

To suppose, as the so-called Young Earth creationists do, that God dictated modern scientific ideas to ancient and uncomprehending scribes is to distort the biblical message beyond recognition. Modern science was not in the worldview of the biblical authors and it is not in the Bible. **Science is not a sinister enterprise aimed at destroying faith. It's an honest exploration**

**of the wonderful world that God created.**

We are often asked to think about what Jesus would do, if he lived among us today. Who would Jesus vote for? What car would he drive? To these questions we should add, “**What would Jesus believe about origins?**”

And the answer? Jesus would believe evolution, of course. He cares for the Truth.

**Question 14:** *In assessing how you personally regard Karl Giberson’s ideas, does it make a difference to learn that he is playing a national role in urging theologically conservative Christians to accept the findings of the evolutionary sciences? Please elaborate.*

*Note: Giberson’s essay is available online at the CNN website:*

<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/10/my-take-jesus-would-believe-in-evolution-and-so-should-you/>

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