

Jim Burklo

“Open Christianity and Progressive Faith”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 8 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I am your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Jim Burklo](#) is our featured guest. [Jim](#) is [Associate Dean of Religious Life](#) at the [University of Southern California](#). Ordained in the [United Church of Christ](#), a former pastor, Jim is a leading voice of [Progressive Christianity](#). He’s the author of [Open Christianity: Home by Another Road](#) and [Birdlike and Barnless: Meditations, Prayers, Poems, and Songs for Progressive Christians](#). Here, Jim and I discuss “Open Christianity and Progressive Faith.”

Host: Hello Jim Burklo, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Jim: Michael, it's a pleasure to have this conversation with you.

Host: I've been looking forward to this. Jim, one of the reasons I wanted to have you on this call is because of how respected and well known you are in [Progressive Christian](#) circles. If you could just let our listeners know who you are in this movement, and what are some of your proudest accomplishments.

Jim: Right now, I'm the Associate Dean of Religious Life at the University of Southern California. We're the [interfaith center](#) for the university, and we have 90 religious clubs. All the world's religions are represented here—[Christian](#), [Hindu](#), [Muslim](#). We have a [Zoroastrian](#) club here—just to give you some sense of the breadth of representation at our campus. I am an ordained [United Church of Christ](#) pastor and I served churches, and also was the campus pastor for the [liberal Protestants](#) at [Stanford University](#) for about ten years. Then I was a community organizer and agency director serving homeless people in the Palo Alto area for a number of years.

I got into writing about Progressive Christianity as a result of my work at Stanford. Students would come to me with the big questions. Most of my job was to listen to them and

be supportive of them as they went through their own journeys, but they would often ask me for my opinion, my point of view about matters spiritual and religious. Many of them were going through crises of faith because it was the first time they'd been exposed to other religions or other ways of looking at the Bible or sacred literature. For some students, that's very shocking. And I'm sure you've been through that, Michael, as a pastor yourself—it's a shattering kind of experience.

So, I started to write down my own thoughts about this, and that led me to writing a book called [Open Christianity](#), which is kind of a primer, an introduction to the whole idea of [theologically progressive Christianity](#). Then I later wrote a book called [Birdlike and Barnless: Meditations, Prayers, and Songs for Progressive Christians](#), which is more like a Common Book of Prayer for theologically Progressive Christians. I've always been interested in finding other ways to express Christianity and practice the faith that express the heart and soul of the faith, while recognizing that it's time for another way of looking at the scripture and the tradition—in light of the fact that there are other religions in the world that are as good for other people as ours is for us, and in light of the fact that science matters. For a lot of us, we want to have a connection that's not a wall between religion and science, but find bridges that do not deny in any way the knowledge and wisdom of science, and at the same time are reflective of our spirituality, our spiritual experience.

I've really admired your work for all these years, because you've done such a fantastic job of popularizing and communicating with the wider public about those issues. So: all the more fun to be having this chat today.

Host: Thanks, Jim. I first learned of your work because somebody gave me a copy of your book *Open Christianity* five or six years ago. I found it to be a hugely hopeful, heart-opening book for many Christians who are fearful of looking at their faith from a perspective other than the one they were given by their Sunday school teachers or their parents or preachers. Your book, I found it to be almost like a handhold, walking through a way that someone can be still deeply Christian, devoutly Christian—yet also have an inclusive heart, and an understanding of evidence as Divine communication and that all other religions aren't simply paths to hell.

Jim: I appreciate your referring to it in terms of heart and spirituality. A lot of that has to do with my wife editing the book. She was a terrific editor. She'd say, "That's too much hubris there, too much anger there." What I discovered in the process of writing that first book, now ten years ago, was that those of us in the theologically progressive world have been very good at blowing holes in the great battleship of orthodoxy—with cannons. We've been good at deconstructing some of the constructs of [Protestant](#) orthodoxy, in particular, and [Catholic](#) too, and generally blowing open issues that have been a problem for a long time.

So we've been good at *destruction*, but we have a lot of work to do in terms of *construction* and connecting the heart with all of this, and finding new ways to worship with heart and soul. That's something I take very seriously and have tried to work on for the last ten years, since I started working on this book.

We've got to find a way to communicate our faith in a positive way, and I think it's happening. That's the exciting part, that there's a whole movement across the country, around the world, to find new ways to express old ideas and experiences—but to put them in terms and ways of expression that honor tradition and at the same time recognize the best that science and history and social progress can bring us. It's all about coming up with a positive message.

Host: In fact, I'd love to hear you—you've got bits of it in your book—but could you share a little of your testimonial? How did you come to an embrace of science and evolution? What's your spiritual trajectory?

Jim: Yes, well, from a person like yourself, who comes from a Pentecostal background, I would expect no different question than that one. *[laughter]* Give a little testimony; that's good. That's what you do so well.

My own testimony on this goes all the way back to childhood. I grew up in a [Presbyterian](#) church until I was about thirteen. When we moved to [Santa Cruz](#), California, we joined an independent [Congregational](#) church. I was a child who always had a sense of the mystical, always had a deep sense of the mystery and the numinous in the world. A phrase I wouldn't have used when I was ten years old, but in retrospect would now, was having a sense of awe and wonder at nature. I was a rock collector, and all I wanted to be as a kid was a [geologist](#). I'm looking around my office now; it's full of rocks—some of them, I picked up as a child. They're a real connection with my past. But I always had a sense of the holy and the wonder and the mystery of nature. My parents say that when I was a kid, I would sleepwalk into their bedroom and recite the geologic eras to them.

Host: Are you serious? *[laughter]*

Jim: Seriously, I was that nerdy about [geology](#). It was sweet, and my father was very encouraging of that. A shared interest in geology is a nice connection between us still to this day.

So, I was fascinated by science, took it very seriously, but also had a sense of the numinous and the spiritual—and I was fascinated by Sunday school. But the two did not meet. They conflicted. I'd hear things in Sunday school that just did not sound right, and I would argue with my Sunday school teachers more and more vociferously the older I got.

When I was sixteen, I went on a backpacking trip in the [Sierra Nevada](#) with a group of [Fundamentalist](#) Christians. I didn't know that they were Fundamentalists at the time I signed up for the trip. Everywhere we would stop, they would pull out their floppy Bibles and tell us the what-for about what was expected from us from the Bible—literally. I would argue with everything they said, and the other skids would say, “Just shut up! The longer you go on, the longer this takes.” I was so mad at them for spouting such nonsense.

Then we got to the top of [Kearsarge Pass](#) in the Sierra, this spectacular mountaintop experience, and the leader, of course, pulls out the Bible and what is he going to read? The [Sermon on the Mount](#). Well, he read the part about loving your enemies—and this was right in the height of the [Vietnam War](#), and I was an anti-war protestor in high school—so I heard the part about loving your enemies, and it went straight into my heart. It was like an explosion inside, a direct experience of Divine love. I was sure I had experienced God directly. I fell silent. I said hardly anything more the whole trip, because I was so completely boggled by the idea that you could have love so strong that you could love your enemies. *That's what God is: God is loving your enemies—including loving these Fundamentalists that I was with.*

At the end of the trip, I had to thank these folks that I thought were completely wrong about everything—almost. The one thing they were right about is that there is this Divine love. It is a very powerful, real thing—and that's what it's about.

That was a moment for me; that was my conversion experience, if you will. That's what set me on the path of my life. I never did agree with the theology of those folks, even at the time, but there was something that we had in common. And I still believe that. There's a way that we can connect across theological divisions at the level of the heart. I believe that still.

Host: I completely agree. In fact, that's one of the three core reasons why I felt called, you could say, to initiate these conversations among thought leaders within the Christian tradition, who more than accept an evolutionary worldview; they really embrace it—to where the science, the evidential understanding of reality, enriches or enhances or stretches or expands or deepens their faith in some way.

Jim: Well, that was with me from that incident onward. The wall that had existed before, between what I was learning about science and what I was experiencing or thinking about spirituality and religion was gone. Everything came together through love—and the love was there in the stones and the lakes down below, and in the sky. It was all one.

Since then, I got fascinated by all the work that's been done about brain science and religion together. There's the [Stephen Jay Gould](#) approach, where there's a wall. He regarded science and religion as “[non-overlapping magisteria](#).” That approach never really made sense to me. I respected his point of view, but I'm much more intrigued by [Whitehead](#) and [process thought](#), and some other approaches that don't put a wall up but create a bridge, a connection that's profound.

Host: [Ian Barbour](#) has four models of how science and religion relate, and the last two are learning from each other, and then integration. There's more than one approach that can be soul nourishing.

Jim: Yes, I would tend toward believing there's integration possible as opposed to a separation, definitely.

Host: I've found the work of philosopher of religion [Loyal Rue](#) to be extraordinarily useful in this regard. I think he's got the best general theory of religion that I've been exposed to; it's quite extraordinary.

Jim: I need to learn about this. Tell me about it.

Host: Probably the best short piece, where you can get a great overview, is his book [Everybody's Story](#). It's a gem by.

Jim: All right, I will look for that, thank you.

Host: Sure. He talks about religions as maps of reality—that all religions are mythic maps of “how things are and which things matter.” Said another way, religions are mythic maps of what's real and what's important. If you abide by the map, you'll experience personal wholeness, and your group experiences cultural coherence. It's a way of cutting through the understanding some people have—like [Daniel Dennett](#), for example. I think one of the fatal flaws, in my opinion, of Dennett's otherwise good book [Breaking the Spell](#) is that his understanding of religion is inadequate. It's not accurate. He basically sees religion as belief in otherworldly entities.

Jim: And that's a problem with all [the new public atheists](#). It's a lack of awareness, even of Progressive Theology—that there's a world of Christians who don't put up that wall or create the conditions where a wall would need to exist. Atheists don't seem to know that we're here.

Host: I think [the New Atheists have a role to play](#).

Jim: Absolutely.

Host: I sometimes think about it this way: The faith that [Sam Harris](#) claims is ending, in his book [The End of Faith](#), deserves to end. It's not faith anyway; it's not trust. It's attachment to beliefs. The God that [Richard Dawkins](#) says is a delusion, *is* a delusion. [God is not a supernatural terrorist](#) who blesses some and smites others, who roots for one football team over another. These are trivial notions of ultimacy, of God.

Jim: Yes, and even in more orthodox or traditional Christianity there are so many flavors and nuances that are just left out of the discussion among the New Atheists. I think that's unfortunate. Have you seen [Scotty McLennan](#)'s book, [Jesus Was a Liberal?](#) (video [here](#))

Host: No, I haven't.

Jim: You might enjoy that, because it's a response to the four public atheists, and it's beautifully done. He's the Dean of Religious Life at Stanford, and he's a gentle, generous soul. The way he honors the contributions of these folks, but also responds to the strawman they've created, is beautifully done. It's a nice response.

Host: That's great. One of the reasons why I was excited about [this teleseries](#), this series of conversations, is that I hope that it is compelling evidence that there's million in the middle, represented by these various thought leaders, who are the *not* the polar extremes. They're neither faith-rejecting atheists nor the science-rejecting creationists. They embrace both. We don't all embrace it in the same way. We have different interpretations, but we find a way of integrating evolution and science in our faith. And for most of us, it goes beyond mere reconciliation; it's actually an enrichment.

Jim: Yes, absolutely, and a deepening of faith itself. That's what excites me, and what I love about your work. There's this embrace that feeds your faith and devotion —and that's part of it. It's integral to the faith to have this perspective and to get excited about evolution. A lot of folks think that if you take God out of the picture as the manipulator of the universe—getting in there and somehow tinkering directly to create humans without evolution—that somehow when you take that kind of God out of the equation, then there's no magic, mystery, wonder, awe. And that is *not* the case. I think it's even more amazing that you can have a process as simple, in a way, as evolution. That this simple algorithm could generate such staggering diversity, complexity, and intelligence, and that this could come out of a process like that, I think is staggering. That's awe-inspiring in the extreme.

Host: I'm curious, could you say a little bit about how you hold evolution? How do you think about the history of the universe and evolution in a way that expands your faith, or deepens your faith? How do you hold it in a way that feels sacred to you?

Jim: I very much admire the work of [Teilhard de Chardin](#), and his idea of cosmic evolution toward the Omega Point. In a way, what's happening right now in human civilization indicates that some of the visionary constructs that Teilhard expressed in his book [The Phenomenon of Man](#) (better translation: [The Human Phenomenon](#)) are actually coming true. There is an emerging “[noosphere](#),” or field of knowledge, and technology development really is a reflection of that. It's creating that. The [World Wide Web](#) is a certain kind of noosphere. There does seem to be a trend or tendency in the Creation toward wholeness, toward fulfillment, toward higher consciousness. That doesn't mean it's a linear process, but there is an overall trend toward higher consciousness.

Host: There are ways of talking about that trend that are so grounded in our best evidential understanding that scientists don't balk at it at all. One of the best popularizations of Teilhard's

ideas, in a way that's much more accessible—and acceptable to the mainstream scientific community—is [Robert Wright's book *Nonzero*](#). It's one of the top ten books I've ever read in my life. Another book is [John Stewart's *Evolution's Arrow*](#), which again is one of the top ten books I've ever read; it's just an extraordinary book. In fact, the whole thing is available as a [free PDF download from John's website](#). If you just put “evolution's arrow” into Google, you'll get to it. (Also see [here](#) for a brief overview, drawing on John Stewart's work, of the trajectory of human history in the direction of consistently expanding cooperation and complexity.)

My wife, [Connie Barlow](#), actually wrote a book for MIT Press on exactly this topic. It's called [Evolution Extended: Biological Debates on the Meaning of Life](#). There she takes a look at some of the best science writing that's happened in the last 150 years on this whole question of meaning and direction—and what can and can't be said—and where there are differing interpretations of some of the same evidence. What *can* be said is that, from the perspective of the universe as a whole, we see [greater complexity, greater interdependence, and greater cooperation at larger and wider scale over time](#). Sometimes there have been setbacks or mis-turns, but we still see the universe as a whole having gone from simple atoms to more complex atoms, to molecules and more complex molecules, to creatures and more complex creatures, and then to societies and more complex societies.

Jim: Absolutely. That does seem to be the way evolution works in the long-term and in the aggregate—maybe not in the immediate term, but definitely over the long run.

Host: Jim, you began the conversation talking about your work in Progressive Christianity, and you mentioned two different organizations. For people who aren't familiar with what exactly Progressive Christianity is, could you share a bit about what you see as the distinguishing features of Progressive Christianity, and then anything you'd like to say about either of these two organizations.

Jim: This is obviously a matter of great fascination to me, to watch this unfold. In one sense, Progressive Christianity is no news. It's just Christianity with its roots all the way back to Jesus. It's rooted in Jesus; it's rooted in the Scripture; it's rooted in the many traditions of the Church. I think there's a kind of thread that runs from the very beginning—before the beginning—of the Christian Church that ties things together with this present movement of theologically Progressive Christianity. I would say that's the mystical tradition of the faith.

By mystical, I don't mean hocus-pocus magic; I mean direct experience, direct encounter with Divinity, experiential faith. That's a thread that's very strong in the Bible itself, in the New Testament, and certainly in the Hebrew Scriptures. There's a thread that runs all the way from the beginning of direct experiential encounter—Moses with the burning bush. “Who are you?” asks Moses to the bush that was talking. “I Am that I Am,” answers the bush. That would be a very profound mystical idea or experience that's being described there. You run that all the way through the Hebrew Scriptures, through the prophets, through Jesus, through the early Church, through the great mystical teachers of the Church—[Meister Eckhart](#), [Hildegard of Bingen](#),

[Julian of Norwich](#). There's a thread there that's focused on how we encounter and experience God directly in prayer—as well as in service to each other. It's not so much focused on the dogma and doctrine, important though that is for the history of the Church and so much a part of our matrimony and patrimony, if you will, of the faith—but much more focused on experience and practice. I think that's how I would describe the connection with Progressive Christianity today.

Back in the 1800s, we started having the German theologians discover that there's an historical, critical way of reading the Scriptures that parses out the different strands. This was the perspective that began to relativize, if you will, the origins of the Scripture and the background of it, and did so in a way that some people embraced and others were shocked—that's how we got Fundamentalism. In the Americas people could not handle the discoveries of the German theologians and were angry at this prospect that there was a way to read the Bible that was not literalistic, that recognized that if it looks like a myth, it's probably a myth. And that that's okay; it's still an extremely important myth. But we don't have to read the Bible literally anymore. It's not appropriate to do that, knowing what we know about history and about science. And so a more liberal strand of the Church began to recognize that this was a distinction that needed to be made. Others rejected that, and so we have the Fundamentalist Evangelical reaction to that. So I would say that Progressive Christianity of today has that history.

Now, I think what happened is that there was a crying need felt by many in the last fifteen or so years to make explicit what it means to embrace a religion that “takes the Bible seriously because we do not take it literally,” that embraces the social witness of the Gospel every bit as much as the personal, moral witness, and that recognizes that other religions may be as good for others as ours is for us—the pluralistic approach to religion. All that came together in this idea of Progressive Christianity.

This viewpoint was beautifully expressed by [John Robinson](#) in his book in the '60s, [Honest to God](#). It was the early revolutionary book that put it into words, and that had a powerful effect on a lot of people who later would refer to themselves as Progressive Christians. [John Spong](#) was very influenced by Robinson's book, and I was, as were many others. But it wasn't until [Jim Adams](#) came along that we really got a terminology for this. Jim Adams is the retired pastor of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. As a retirement project, he set up an organization, the idea of which came from his church people. They proposed it to him. They said, “You really need to codify, or express somehow, the magic that has brought our church so much growth as a congregation.” So he and his church members created what we call the “[Eight Points of Progressive Christianity](#),” which you can see at [ProgressiveChristianity.org](#). Again, the gist of it is that we are Christians who take our tradition seriously but recognize that other traditions bring people to God as ours does for us. We recognize that there are a lot of ways to read the Scriptures, and that there's not just one way that one must follow in order to be Christian, and that there's room at the Communion Table for all of us. We accept gay and lesbian people as they are. That's a big part of [Progressive Christianity](#)—a welcoming of gay and lesbian people, as they have been created by the Divine evolutionary process. And so as a

result of Jim Adams' work in creating this organization, The Center for Progressive Christianity, we found *words* to express this general point of view.

So when I discovered TCPC on the web ten years ago, I was just electrified. When I stumbled upon it through a web search one day, and I read the eight points, I was just electrified. I thought, "My whole life I've been waiting to see this! Finally, there's a succinct expression of this general perspective, and we've got a word to describe it, Progressive Christianity." I was thrilled. So, I called Jim Adams on the phone right on the spot, and I said, "Sign my church up. Sign me up." And then we became friendly, and I wound up on the board.

Jim Adams is still very active. He wrote a book [From Literal to Literary](#). It's kind of an encyclopedia of biblical metaphor, and he's out there still pushing that book. He's very active, but he finally went into second retirement and turned over the presidency. We got [Fred Plumer](#) as our president several years ago, and he's done a great job. Fred is a retired UCC pastor, and he's a ball of fire. He's great. So, the organization lives on, and it's got affiliate congregations around the country—around the world, actually: Britain, Australia, Northern Ireland; New Zealand is real strong. There was a great book that came out a few years ago by [Hal Taussig](#), called [Finding a New Spiritual Home](#). He did a thorough survey of the whole country, and he came up with a list of 1,000 congregations around the U.S. that he would identify as theologically and socially progressive churches.

Another thing to add to this mix is that when TCPC was founded about fifteen years ago, by Jim Adams and his church folks, and as the usage of the term Progressive Christian spread, it really was about *both* theologically and socially progressive. It was about theology, but also about justice, inclusion, peace. Things got interesting in 2005, when Jim Wallis's book *God's Politics* was printed—right after the reelection of George Bush. At that point, there was a huge backlash among Evangelical Christians—particularly young evangelicals—who were quite unhappy with being associated with the religious right. Overnight, because of their distaste for what had just happened and the co-optation of their faith by the Republican Party, effectively, they rose up. The way they rose up was by turning Jim Wallis into a rock star. So, I remember there was a day when the definition of Progressive Christian changed. That was the day that [Terry Gross](#) was interviewing [Jim Wallis](#) and referred to him as a "Progressive Christian minister"—which cracked all of us up in the movement, because we thought of him as a socially liberal but theologically conservative Christian pastor.

Basically overnight, there became two different definitions of Progressive Christianity. So now you had a class of folks who had very traditional theological views but socially liberal views being known as Progressive Christians. Right now, I would say that this terminology has got multiple meanings, and I think that's okay. I don't have a problem with that. But it does confuse people a bit. The group I'm on the board of now is [Progressive Christians Uniting](#). It's in Los Angeles and it is very much focused on the social witness of the Gospel. Our current big project in California is we're organizing a statewide interfaith effort to provide a moral voice for fundamental governance reform in the State of California. This state needs a new constitution. The U.S. Constitution has 4,500 words. The California Constitution has 80,000 words. We have

a serious problem in this state with governance that affects the poor and minorities with a great disproportionate effect. So we're rising up to create a religious moral voice to change that.

Host: So Jim, as a pastor, and also someone who's worked with many students, do you have any stories you would tell, or an experience that you've had, where you've seen a young person come to an embrace of science and evolution with their faith in a way that really made a difference for them.

Jim: One comes to mind that illustrates a lot of things. A few years ago when I was the pastor of [Sausalito Presbyterian Church](#) in northern California, we'd celebrate [Evolution Sunday](#) every year. "Evolution Sunday" is part of [Michael Zimmerman's Clergy Letter Project](#). It's a great thing, which TCPC.org embraced strongly—congregations all over the world celebrating the compatibility of evolution and faith.

Host: I think there's about 12,000 congregations doing that now.

Jim: It's huge. It's a really big deal. So, we were celebrating Evolution Sunday in Sausalito, and I invited Dr. [Joan Roughgarden](#) to come and speak. Maybe you're familiar with her book [Evolution and Christian Faith](#). It's a beautiful and concise, perfect little book—so well done. Joan Roughgarden [an evolutionary biologist at Stanford](#). She says there are problems with the traditional Darwinian theory of evolution. One of them is its focus on reproduction: that the ultimate aim of living things is to reproduce. Roughgarden says that evolution does not account very well for the reality of homosexual behavior. So the existence of homosexuality, not just in humans but in all sorts of animals, is a challenge to what Darwin originally was arguing.

It was particularly intense to have her talk about that topic in church, because she's a transgendered person herself. She used to be [John Roughgarden](#). That really added to the richness of the morning. Within the congregation, I had invited one of my former Stanford students, a biology student. Afterwards, I introduced the two of them. The biology student was asking Joan about Jesus' chromosomes. She said, "Since Jesus had no contribution to his chromosomes from a father, what do you think was his chromosomal structure? What about the Xs and Ys there? How would that have added up?" Just to hear the two of them discussing Jesus' chromosomes together—Joan taking it with a sense of humor, but with great seriousness too. You can only imagine what it would be like to have a transgendered evolutionary biologist having this chat about X and Y chromosomes of Jesus! *[laughter]*

Host: Jim, what would you say to a young person who was struggling with how to think about science and religion, how to hold the two? What coaching would you offer?

Jim: Well, I've had a lot of discussions with students over the years that I worked at [Stanford](#) and now here at [USC](#). These are elite research universities. I think what a lot of folks are taught in their churches, a lot of what young people come to USC and Stanford with, is they're told

one thing in church and something completely different at school. What they tend to do is create a wall. It's like there's religion over here, and science over there—and we've got to go with the science program in science class. But when we go to our fellowship group or to church, we drop the science and take on a new lingo and put a wall between the two worlds.

What I've always urged students to do is to consider that maybe there doesn't need to be a wall there. Maybe there's something seamless and connected. So I have those chats. We've had those discussions a lot, and I give them a reading list. These days, the reading list includes your book and others that illustrate this approach. The students are interested and excited about that. There aren't that many places, if any, in academia where you can have this kind of conversation in class—and I think that's a problem.

Host: If I could wave a wand and make some change in the world, I would have that in high schools and colleges there would be an opportunity to have a worldviews class, or an interpretation class. In other words, how could we take our best evidential understanding of reality (which we get through a whole range of sciences) and interpret it in ways that generate or elicit gratitude, awe, thanksgiving, trust, compassion, generosity, integrity—ways that help us [live with greater integrity and have thriving relationships](#)? How can an evidential worldview do that? And how can it be interpreted in a variety of ways so that each religious tradition is able to incorporate it—not fear it—because they recognize that the literal interpretations that perhaps they grew up with are actually a trivializing of the faith, a belittling.

Jim: Amen.

Host: It's more *real* than that. I think we do our students in high school and college, but especially high school, a real disservice if we don't give them an opportunity to integrate what they're learning in class, as well as on the [Discovery Channel](#), with their religious worldview.

Jim: What about the whole thing? What about all of it being divine, and that the evolutionary process itself is somehow divine? It doesn't mean that there's some scripted plan by a “supernatural creator” to get there. There's another way to look at this that brings it together and that's seamless, and that gives us a sense of the divinity of all of it, of the entire cosmos and its process of unfolding.

One of the several elephants in the room in Christianity is the whole topic of the miraculous and the supernatural. I really believe that as long as Christianity is unable to shake itself from the shackles of supernaturalism, we're going to have problems. We're going to have problems with integrating our spirituality with what we know about science. We're going to have problems with *exceptionalism*, the whole idea that Christianity is the only way. Thus we're going to have problems with religious exclusivism. It's just going to keep coming up again and again and again until we realize that the real miracle of this world is the fact of existence itself. That's a jaw-dropping miracle. To hang our faith on whether or not Jesus really walked on

water or physically rose from the dead is not only going to lead us down a blind alley in faith, it's also going to contribute to a misunderstanding of our relationship with the natural world.

I think that's an important area for theologically progressive Christianity to work on: to come up with a language of faith and a reinterpretation of Christianity that really makes that distinction clear. We take the Bible very, very seriously—in fact, even more seriously—because we do not take it literally when it comes to matters of history and science. The exciting part that I really love watching is how people are starting to weave this theological understanding into new hymns and new litanies and new expressions of worship and devotion and prayer. There's a world of artistic expression coming on that gives voice to this perspective, and that's a really big deal, because that's where you start making the heart connection.

Host: I completely agree. I think that's some of the most important work happening within the Church—really, within the world. If I could wave my wand, another change I would make is exactly on this subject—children's material, nature-based evolution, science-oriented materials that are inspiring and that teach values to kids are becoming available. Connie is doing that, taking the epic of evolution and then having programs for kids and that ministers can use in worship and religious education. So many churches basically stick with tired old Bible stories, as though that's what religious education is all about. I think there's a craving for something larger and more contemporary. God didn't stop revealing all the really important stuff back in the Bible; God is still revealing things today.

Jim: There's a lot of work that needs to be done with children's curriculum. At TCPC.org, you can go there and get the new [children's curriculum](#), which is a step in the right direction. Also, TCPC.org is about to release a collection of liturgy materials from all over the world that will be online. That's a real big deal because those will be liturgical materials that integrate this perspective and worship; I cannot wait for that to come out. [Polly Moore](#) is working on that. She's the former VP of Genentech and has an M.Div. from Pacific School of Religion; she's also a musician. She is the woman to be doing this job, putting this all together—so look for that. That'll be a rocker, too.

Host: That's great. Related to what we've just been talking about, a third change I'd love to help make is to empower ministers. I'd love to see every preacher, every pastor subscribe to [Science News](#). And in the process of sermon preparation, at least one Sunday a month, instead of basing their sermon on the Bible, base it on something that's been revealed recently through science, and speak about it as revelation, as [public revelation](#)—what God is revealing through science (see [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)).

Jim: Well, get busy, Michael. It's time for you to write a science lectionary. Think about that—seriously. We've got our 52-week lectionary on a three-year cycle. Imagine if every Sunday there would be a passage with something that relates to the natural world. That'd be fantastic.

Host: Because we've got a number of pastors that are part of this series, maybe that's something we can collectively work on together.

Jim: Let's get busy. Let's make a science lectionary. I'd love to help with that.

Host: You've got my pastoral vote. You're absolutely right that kind of thing is needed.

Jim: If we can weave it into the sermons. That's something I've tried to do over the years—look at a leaf and just ponder a leaf on a tree.

Host: And the more science you know, the deeper you can do that pondering.

Jim: Right. I did a whole sermon once on the [apical meristem](#), where the stem cells are in a leaf, and how that relates to emergence—to growth of the soul as well as the plant, and how there's a potentiality there that can go in many directions, depending on how it unfolds.

Host: Jim, I want to begin winding this conversation down. One of the things that I am floating out to see if it resonates with people, to see if they have a better way of articulating it, is what I'm calling a *core commons*. That whatever our differences—theologically, metaphysically, how we approach Scripture, how we even think about Scripture, how we interpret any aspect of our tradition—I think there are a few things we hold in common that are really important, both in values and in perspectives. So, I want to suggest my initial draft offering, and see if it resonates.

First, is that we all value the deep-time perspective that is brought through science. Whatever our differences, we all value a science-based, deep-time evolutionary worldview, a perspective that's grounded in our best 'collective intelligence' at this time in history. I think that's solid. I mean, everybody's there.

The second is that we all have a 'global heart.' That is, we're not merely committed to smaller circles, but we're committed to the health and the wellbeing of the larger body of life of which we're a part. We're committed to evolution continuing in healthy ways.

And the third is related to the first one, in that evidence is revelatory. Evidence reveals the Divine. It's part of the Divine communication today: through historical evidence, scientific evidence, and cross-cultural evidence. I think most people in [this teleseries](#) agree that, in addition to Scripture and tradition, there's evidence. Evidence is a different kind of authority.

Jim: Right, and again, I think everybody wants that. Even the Fundamentalists want that—they want evidence. That's an important part of everybody's conversation.

Host: So, Jim, is there anything you'd like our listeners to know, any project that you're working on, or you could mention the titles of your books again, or how they could learn more.

Jim: Definitely. Well, my two books are still in print, [Open Christianity](#) and [Birdlike and Barnless](#). I am right now working on a couple of writing projects. One is, I've written a novel about religion in America, illustrated through the eyes of a teenager who goes on a spiritual quest and tries out every religion he can find. It's a lot about what happens to religion when it hits the shores of the United States: the interplay of our culture and our religion as the religions of the globe have come here. It's very much a reflection of the work I'm doing now with students of all these different faith backgrounds. I learn so much every day from my students.

The other writing project I'm taking on now is to write a book about spirituality and service. I've spent so much of my life doing work in the nonprofit sector, and now part of my job here at USC is teaching public policy at the social work graduate school. I have a very strong interest in social justice and social action, and in getting students involved in community service. This would be a book of reflections on the path of service, and the spirituality of social service.

Host: I like that, because so many people think of spirituality as either an inner process or a transcendent thing—whereas I see [spirituality in terms of right relationship to reality](#) (also [here](#)), including all the people in our lives.

Jim: . . . and the Earth.

In a nutshell, the core of this book comes from my own experience that prayer and meditation practice is virtually identical to the practice of soulful service to other people. The discipline you've got to follow in order to be a good social worker or social justice advocate is identical to the work you have to do in prayer. It's about standing back and observing, with love and without judgment. If you can do that in your social action, and if you can do that in your prayer life, you will experience God directly.

Host: . . . which comes back to what you said was the highest value at the start, and what Progressive Christianity is about.

Jim: Absolutely: direct experience with the Divine—the Divine in the wonderful biblical sense that love is God and God is love, and that we are to be humble in the face of this overwhelming love. It is a love so great that it extends to enemies, a love so great that it binds the universe together and urges it forward toward creativity and consciousness.

Host: Amen, brother. Thank you, Jim Burklo, for sharing your ideas, your perspective, and your experience—and the experience of your parishioners and students—here today on the leading edge of faith.

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