

Denis Lamoureux

“Beyond the Evolution vs. Creation Debate”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 3 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith.](#)” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today our featured guest is [Denis Lamoureux](#). [Denis](#) is an associate professor of science and religion at [St. Joseph’s College](#) in the University of Alberta. His appointment is the first tenure-track position in Canada dedicated to teaching and research on the relationship between scientific discovery and Christian faith. He’s a member of the executive council of the [Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation](#) and is a major voice for the celebration of evolution within evangelical settings.

He is the author of [Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution](#), which was published in 2008, and then a condensed version (which was published in 2009) titled [I Love Jesus & I Accept Evolution](#). [Denis](#) suggested as the title of our conversation, “Beyond the Evolution verses Creation Debate.” You will quickly see how [Denis](#) and I have traveled a similar route and really spiral each other in this conversation. It’s quite a delight.

Host: Hello, [Denis](#).

Denis: Hi, [Michael](#).

Host: I don’t want to assume that everybody is going to be familiar with your work, so what I’d love for you to do—and this would not be a place to be humble—is just share how you see what you’re proudest of, in terms of your own contributions to this movement, and where you see your niche or your particular calling within this evolution and creation conversation.

Denis: Let’s bring it all the way back to the early ‘70s when I was an undergraduate. I came out of a good Catholic high school, and they told us that evolution doesn’t have to undermine your faith. But that really isn’t enough for a kid who’s asking some questions—and, of course,

in 1972, I'm in a public university, a good university. In fact, I'm teaching in it right now: the [University of Alberta](#) in Edmonton.

Once I saw evolutionary theory, I realized that the culture traps us in a dichotomy; the culture propagates that. You're either on the atheistic evolution side or you're on the creationist, God-creates-in-six-days side. Being trapped in that dichotomy, once I started seeing the evolutionary evidence—and, of course, as an 18-year-old I was trying to build my worldview—I lost my faith and succumbed from deism to agnosticism to finally atheism. So, if you had to sort of look at what I do for a living and what I'm passionate about, in many ways I'm reacting to my personal pain of some 35 years ago and hoping that students do not have to stumble on this.

As a biologist, you know, [evolutionary theory is simply magnificent!](#) There's nothing like it. It's the organizing principle of all of biology. Of course, many religious students come to the university and—I'll be very blunt—the churches do not prepare them for evolution. In particular, the evangelicals basically say, "This is Satan's lie. Go ahead and do those classes, answer what they want you to answer, and get through it." And, of course, today many kids want to go into the health sciences—like medicine, dentistry, and nursing. They have no choice but to go through biology, and they're going to see the pattern. And so, in terms of what I do and what is my focus, I teach science-and-religion classes for undergrads so they don't stumble on this.

If I had to describe the average student that comes into my class, they're great students; I cannot ask for better students. I teach only electives—not courses that are required—so the students really want to be there. The average student is compartmentalized, and they do this for their own psychological safety. I'm not dissing them for that; we all do that when we get something that doesn't fit our worldview too well. So in one compartment they have what they do at university in the biology department five days a week. Then on Sunday morning, the other compartment is "the world is created in six days" or some sort of anti-evolutionary context. They come in compartmentalized, but they know intuitively there's got to be something more to that.

My great privilege and pleasure is to present them a variety of different models in between the two extremes of, say, the [Richard Dawkins'](#) atheistic evolution and [Ken Ham's](#) Young Earth Creationism. It's just a 13-week course, but the kids *get* it completely. The course is called "[Science and Religion](#)," but it's really hermeneutics—in other words, "Biblical Interpretation 100." And I do it slowly; I do it respectfully. In fact, next week I've got them all set up to really look hard at *Genesis* 1–11: what's going on there. And they're starting to recognize that there is an ancient near-eastern cosmology there.

Now, as an evangelical Christian, [I can tell them that] the Holy Spirit and the inspiration process used this as a vehicle or, if you wish, a vessel to get across some central messages of faith: God is the creator; the creation is very good; humans are created in the image of God; and, of course, humans are sinful—they break their relationship.

Bottom line, I think my contribution is to help undergrads not stumble on this as I did. There's a funny sort of symmetry here: the course is 13 weeks long; I spent 13 years in graduate school: two masters and two PhDs (a PhD in evangelical theology and a PhD in

evolutionary biology). And it's that experience in grad school that I basically put together in this one-term course. At the end of the term, it's just spectacular to watch where these kids go with this stuff.

Host: I can only imagine. I was a student at [Evangel College](#) in Springfield, Missouri, and it was professors *like you* who were my lifeline at the time, because I didn't grow up with any kind of a personal relationship to God in any real sense—certainly in no Evangelical sense. It wasn't until I was in the army and struggled with drug and alcohol and addiction issues, and then went to an [Assemblies of God](#) church where I made a profession of Christ and immersed myself at that time in Bible study: I read the Bible straight through twice. But all the people I hung out with and the people I fellowshiped and worshipped with were all anti-evolutionary creationists. They were all [Young Earth creationists](#). So the message I received was that evolution is of the devil and all the evils of the world could be attributed to Darwin.

So when I went to Evangel College, I was completely unprepared for the fact that they would be teaching evolution. I actually stormed out of class at the start. It was only later that I realized that virtually all evangelical colleges and universities teach evolution in biology class—they just teach it in a God-honoring way.

So I have personally experienced the tremendous value of having professors *like you* help shepherd or take these young students by the hand and help them to think through some of this, help them to interpret the Bible in a different way than perhaps their pastors or their upbringing led them to do. I am seriously applauding both what you do there and also the great online tools you have developed. You've got a number of [online courses](#) and [web lectures](#), including one on Intelligent Design and a [chapter-by-chapter summary](#) of your book, [Evolutionary Creation](#). Could you say a little bit about some of the resources you offer—your books and also your web lectures?

Denis: I sure can. But before I do that, Michael, the hair is standing on the back of my neck because I know your personal story. You and I were almost in parallel universes: being in the military and talking about the alcohol abuse and all this sort of stuff, and eventually coming to Christ. It is haunting when I read your story; we were basically the same guy in different countries.

These colleges, wanting to get accreditation, need real biologists. For anyone who has done biology at the PhD level, the great majority of us all see the evolutionary evidence. And I will tell you: the greatest satisfaction in my life is that I get paid to do this. I can't believe I get paid to do it—I would do it for free because it's so much fun that you can just see in the students' eyes this unbelievable "thank you" for getting them over this hump. Regrettably, there seems to be a disconnect somewhere to the theology departments and the pastors. Somehow there isn't a relationship there, and the pastors don't *get* it—because the great majority of them just don't "buy" evolutionary biology.

Anyway, to answer your question more specifically—and thanks for your kind remarks about the website. My website is really easy to find. Just type my name, Denis Lamoureux, in

Google; I'm the first one up there (see [here](#) and [here](#)). It's the French form of Denis, and my last name is Lamoureux. And there's a series of [web lectures](#) on my website where I take powerpoint slides and I overlay it with my voice. For just about every audio slide lecture [I have on the website, there is also] a handout, so people can follow along.

Host: That's great. Denis, I wonder if you could walk our listeners through... Let's say you were talking to an undergraduate who is really struggling with this notion; even the fact that evolution is being taught in biology class is just throwing them for a loop, and they've got this struggle with their faith. How would you counsel them? What would you say?

Denis: The first thing I would affirm is their faith. I have this amazing intellectual freedom here at the University of Alberta. In our university systems we have a couple of theological colleges attached to the university. Our college, [St. Josephs College](#), is literally in the physical center of the university and undergraduates can take our courses. So, when it comes to these students and as I open my lecture, I underline first and foremost that I'm a Christian. That's what defines me. I love Jesus. That's the central tenet. So I make it very clear and, because I have the freedom and liberty, even in the first class I take out the [Apostles' Creed](#). I read it, I explain it, I sign it, and I date it. And I say to my students, "You don't have to believe this, but beware of Denis's baggage. Okay? Every professor has baggage. Don't think because I'm standing here that I have absolute truth and I'm absolutely right. I'm going to tell you my personal story of my life: I've been wrong many times, and I don't think I'm absolutely certain today—but I think this is where I am today."

So I affirm that. I *am* [an evangelical Christian](#), and it is the evangelical tradition that wrestles the most with evolution—and the reason is because we love the Word of God. And if you read *Genesis* 1–11, it certainly doesn't align with Big Bang cosmology or evolutionary biology, and that's absolutely true. So the basic move is to simply say, let's rethink what the Holy Spirit was doing in the revelatory process.

Now, God is powerful. He can do whatever he wants. He could have put Big Bang cosmology and evolutionary biology way back *when*—3,500 years ago with the first Hebrew writers. Now, think of us today: Half the nation, both in Canada and the United States, doesn't *get* it on evolution. Do you think people 3,500 years ago who had no education *per se* compared to us—do you think they would have *got* it? No!

Then I'll make it into a personal context: "When the Lord speaks to you" (and usually I'll go down onto my knees) "doesn't the Lord come down to your level? When Jesus first met *you*, did He not come down to your level and meet you where you were at—using *your* ideas and your categories to speak to you?" And, you know, all Christians *get* that—because they've experienced that.

Then, I'll say that the Holy Spirit did the very same thing with the ancient peoples. So when it talked about creating the world (say, in *Genesis* 1), it creates a three-tier universe with a firmament that lifts a sea of water above. As weird as that might seem to *us*, one of the

important things about reading the Bible—including all ancient texts, whether they be those of the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, or the Assyrians—is that you’ve got to think through their categories. Of course, the kids all know the song “Dance Like an Egyptian, Walk Like an Egyptian”—we’ve got to *think* like an Egyptian.

So, look up. You see a big blue dome overhead. What does it strike you as? It’s like a sea. What does it do? It spits at you sometimes; it rains. So they get the understanding that this is why it’s a three-tier universe, with a sea overhead.

So what is the Holy Spirit doing? This is a principle of Biblical interpretation that is as old as the hills: God is accommodating. God is coming down to their level and using their categories. Therefore, we as a modern people, when we read an ancient text, we’ve got to separate the ancient cosmology—that is, the best science of their day—of a three-tier universe from the message of faith, the theology. What I would call the inerrant message of faith is that God created it all. That’s the most important thing.

Basically, it’s a move to affirm their faith and say, “Look: I love the Scriptures like you do. I drink from them deeply every day in my morning devotions. I’m *with* you on this. When you say the Holy Spirit is moving you as you read the text, I completely agree. That’s my 30-year experience as a Christian. But here’s the *but*: Let’s look a little more carefully at what’s going on in *Genesis* 1–11.” And I will say *that* was the thing that dismantled me—or started to dismantle my Young Earth Creationism.

I’ll tell you of my commitment to [Young Earth creationism](#): I walked out of medical school at the University of Toronto in 1983 to become a creation scientist. In fact, I wrote a letter to [Duane Gish](#) and [Henry Morris](#) and said, “I want to come down there to the Institute of Creation Research in El Cajon, California, load my guns, and I’m gonna go *battle* those evil evolutionists in the public universities.”

But, if I can speak as devotee for just a second, when I was on my knees, there was this little voice saying, “Denis, you should do some research on [Genesis 1–11](#) before you go to the [Institute for Creation Research](#).” In my day, it just made sense to go to [Regent College](#) in Vancouver, British Columbia, which had two of the greatest evangelicals of the time: [J. I. Packer](#) and [Bruce Waltke](#). And, as they say, the rest is history.

Denis the dentist – oh, by the way, that was my training. You can imagine how much literary scholarship I had in my head: *none*. I mean, I’m reading the Bible like I’m reading prescription pads or my dental journals. I come out of that smug generation of the 70s, that science is king, and if anyone is in *arts*—heck, who would want to get an arts degree? Dang it! I wouldn’t *date* a girl in arts. They’re *unclean*—unless, of course, (and this is for the males who hear this) unless they’re really, really good looking; then we can always change the rules.

Host: Exactly!

Denis: So, the bottom line: I got a three-year education of catching up what I should have done as an undergrad on how you read *literature*—in particular, ancient Near Eastern literature.

And, to complete the story, which is so delicious with me having this thing against the arts, I am classified as a professor of arts at the University of Alberta. So, I'm chewing on my own words.

Host: *[laughter]* What strikes me as so funny is that it was the literary professors and the history professors at [Evangel College](#), in addition to the [Biblical studies and philosophy](#) professors who helped me shift my worldview because they all actually held an evolutionary worldview. They just considered themselves theistic evolutionists or evolutionary Christians. They would call it different things, but they found a way of integrating it. Professor [David Penchansky](#), who was a dynamic Old Testament professor, and [Twila Edwards](#), [Gary Liddle](#) and [Mark McLean](#)—these amazing professors helped open not just my mind; they helped open my heart to be able to see that faith did not have to conflict with an evidential worldview. Both historical evidence and scientific evidence could actually enrich my faith; they could strengthen my faith.

Denis: Michael, that's my experience. Now this is the second time you've gotten hair rising on the back of my neck. That's my experience. Graduate school in theology can sometimes be seen as threatening. I had the Kodak moment where I had to tell my mother what I believed. She was threatened by all this, as were many people in the church. That's why you'll find in a lot of churches that people who do graduate school in theology just don't want to stir it up. For example, when I go to my church on Sunday mornings, I don't even talk about this stuff because to most people there this is irrelevant, and I don't want to stir things up. However, for those of us who have gone through that process, when I look at the way the Holy Spirit inspired the Scripture through these ancient literary processes, to me the Scripture is even more magnificent.

Now, I don't think you need this for your faith. Most people can draw the central messages: that God is the Creator; that Creation is very good; that we're created in the image of God. This is seen by everyone. But if you go to that deeper level, the level of Old Testament scholarship, it is truly magnificent. I carry the parallel over into my other world of biology. When I look at evolutionary biology, to think that God loaded it all up at the Big Bang with the intention of us appearing 15 billion years down the road: I see this as absolutely magnificent.

Host: I completely agree, but that last comment leads me to this question: Concerning the way that you personally integrate a mainstream biological understanding of evolution into your faith, how does that differ from intelligent design for you?

Denis: I'm glad you brought up "[Intelligent Design](#)" because this term has been co-opted and completely mangled by this group of individuals called the Intelligent Design movement or Intelligent Design theorists: [Phil Johnson](#), [Michael Behe](#), [Bill Dembski](#), [Stephen Meyer](#), [Jonathan Wells](#), etc. I was loosely attached to these guys in the last phases of my [anti-evolutionism](#) in the 1990s. I met them all in Cambridge in 1994.

Now, I'm going to use the definition of intelligent design the way [Charles Darwin](#) used it and the way it's been used throughout history. Intelligent design is a belief. It is not a scientific theory nor is it scientifically detectable the way you can detect radiation or something like that. It's a belief that the beauty, complexity, and functionality in nature points to some sort of mind —and that's about all it does. It doesn't get you Jesus—it *could* be Jesus; it could be just about any other divine form.

The Intelligent Design movement is ultimately a “[God of the gaps](#)” movement. It is the movement that sets up another false dichotomy, whereby evolution is only seen as dys-teleological, meaning there is no plan or purpose—which is typical of Richard Dawkins' views. Then they set up their design argument. So, of course, Michael Behe is the paradigm of all this. When it comes to the first cell, Michael Behe believes that there is this intervention and the first cell is put together. In other words, molecular evolution doesn't occur, according to Michael Behe.

When it comes to these Intelligent Design theorists, I'm adamantly opposed to them because they embrace the “God of the gaps”—that God is intervening at different times, adding new information along the way. Historically, we've seen that every time a “God of the gaps” is promoted, that gap is not a gap in the continuum of nature but a gap in knowledge. And these gaps close over time. Regrettably, that is where the Intelligent Design movement goes. The presses went wild with them and this is deeply embedded into the culture.

Host: I appreciate the way you just said all that. When I'm asked about it, typically the way I'll respond is that: by use of the word *design*, Intelligent Design advocates in some ways shoot themselves in the foot. I think I appreciate the *heart* of what Intelligent Design is trying to get at, but by using the language of design, it almost forces one into a mechanistic mindset: that God is the clockmaker, the watchmaker who exists outside of a mechanistic universe. It's an *engineering* model of God—God as *engineer*, not God as *creator*, not God as that reality which is beyond anything we can know, think, or imagine yet also that which is present in every drop of experience, and that's been creating for 13.7 billion years. I see Intelligent Design as offering a trivial God, a God merely outside the system who occasionally intervenes—as you say, a God of the gaps. I think also that Intelligent Design disses the revelatory nature of science. I see *evidence* as the way God is communicating to us today collectively. You may not go there with me on this, but I would be curious to hear what you have to say.

Denis: Keep going. I'm following.

Host: It seems to me that whatever we mean when we use the word *God*, we are pointing to that fundamental reality that brought everything into existence and that is continuing to exist within everything as an immanent, omnipresent nature of creativity. It also is, in some mysterious way, alluring, or beckoning, or calling. People think about it, and model it, and language it in different ways. But, that reality is not to be reduced to a literal understanding of

human persons. So the idea that God has the personality characteristics of [a Bronze Age warlord](#)—and that that’s literally true—is to diss God.

The way I’ve been coming to think about it lately is that [ultimate reality —God](#)—continues to communicate to each of us through our dreams, our intuitions, our feelings, our circumstances, our relationships—as always. I also see God communicating to us collectively. This is the way I see grace now: that God is communicating to us [collectively through evidence](#)—through [historical evidence, scientific evidence, and cross-cultural evidence](#). That in no way puts down the written Scriptures, but it does lift up the whole several-hundred-year, self-correcting, scientific enterprise as revelatory, in some real way.

Denis: I think you’re absolutely right... I just realized I didn’t answer one of your earlier questions. But his is just a treat chatting with you; it could go on forever.

You asked me how I am different from, say, the standard biologist and their approach to design and things like that. Most of my time is spent doing science and religion; I spend most of my time as a theologian. This past year, for example, I did three papers with the chair of Biology, [Michael Caldwell](#), who is an internationally known paleontologist. You might know of “[the snake with legs](#)”; Mike is the one who discovered it. We’re in the lab and we worked on teeth together—[mosasaur](#) teeth and [ichthyosaur](#) teeth

Now Mike is not a theist; Mike is an atheist. How do Mike and Denis work in the lab? Well, when Mike and Denis work in the lab, we’re doing science. Science is simply dealing with physical realities, we’re looking for physical mechanisms, and trying to describe evolution from a physical context. Period. When the papers go out—and, in fact, this goes with all scientific papers—there is none of the [Richard Dawkins](#) atheism or dys-teleological metaphysics being placed in the papers, because those papers would be rejected.

So I’m doing standard biology. Let’s not confuse that. Regrettably, this is what the press does. The press gives the impression that all evolutionists are like Richard Dawkins. In fact, I’ll tell you a lot of evolutionists are quite irritated by the way Dawkins co-opts evolutionary theory for his purposes.

When Mike and I get out of the lab and go to faculty club and have a beer, well of course that’s where a really good discussion goes on between a theist and an atheist. In the end we just agree to disagree. This has no effect in terms of our relationship; Mike is one of my dearest friends. So we do a bit of a compartmentalization move in the following sense: When we do science, we do science. In the same way, when I practice dentistry, I practice it totally mechanically. I don’t go looking for demons and things like that as the causes of tooth pain; I look for infections.

Dawkins really has done an enormous disservice to science by overlaying his own personal metaphysics—which, by the way, I don’t consider all that complex. Many people have commented on this before me—like [Michael Ruse](#), [who is a] famed atheist and one of the most important philosophers of biology in the world. When it comes to Dawkins, Ruse simply says that Dawkins couldn’t pass an undergraduate course in philosophy. I think he is absolutely right, and I’ll go out and say it even further. I’m a professor of theology at a major university,

and I don't think Dawkins could pass a theology course at the undergraduate level. The skeptics are doing an enormous disservice to evolutionary theory by overlaying it with a very suspect metaphysics or, if you wish, philosophy.

Host: I tend to have an ecosystems approach. I see God at work, I see reality at work, in very different ways—and I trust the process. Personally, I'm grateful for what the people who are generally called the [New Atheists](#) are doing. They think they are attacking religion, they think they are dissing God. But in my estimation, certainly in my experience, they are helping me—and other Christians as well—to have a larger, more reality-based understanding of God, guidance, and good news. In fact, I've developed a sermon (published in *Skeptic* magazine [here](#)) that I've preached on and blogged about a few times, called, "[Thank God for the New Atheists](#)." Only the courageous churches ask me to preach that one!

But, I think I agree with you in that, by painting these polarized positions, then one comes to: If you are really going to accept evolution, you have to completely trash any notion of God and any notion of religion. That's as bad as the other end of the spectrum—people saying that if you open yourself to any aspect of an evolutionary worldview, you are going to necessarily lose your faith.

Denis: Michael, I am completely with you. Let me give you an image. Let's take an example of the Creation: God created the world, and we'll use the metaphor of God shooting pool. The [Young Earth creationists](#) say that God comes in and intervenes at different times. Here's God, he lines up the cue ball, hits the rack, one ball goes in. Then God goes around the table, shot after shot after shot, and all the balls go in. Is that impressive? Sure that's impressive.

My view of God is different. God lines up the cue ball, hits the rack, all the balls get in motion, and they keep rolling in at the proper time. First the planets, the stars, the moons, and then—let's use the vertebrates for living organisms—first the fish, then the amphibians and the reptiles, then mammals. Finally, the most important ball, the eight-ball in a billiards game, rolls in. God puts His cue stick down, takes His hand, puts it into the pocket, takes out the eight-ball, brings it to His breast, and has a personal relationship. Now which is the most impressive God, in terms of foresight and balance? It's the God who can do it all in one shot. But at the same time, it's a personal God who intervenes with us.

Now I'm an [Evangelical](#), so you probably know my view in terms of the [New Age](#) religions. But people who embrace New Age religions never forget that they are created in the image of God. They have a natural theology. I know many of these people; they have a loving heart—and that is the greatest expression of the image of God: for us to love like God. They have a sense of immanence—that God is near all the time. I think one of the problems with the traditional Christian approaches to God is that God tends to be out there in the heavens and has nothing to do with us. There is no sense of immanence. So I learn from *all* different religious traditions. Actually, the notion of immanence is in there in the Christian tradition—if only Christians will look at it. For example, in [Colossians 1](#), the cosmic Christ is there, imbuing,

throughout the entire creation. So in that regard, I resonate quite deeply with regard to their understanding of immanence.

One thing I find with a number of these folks: they usually come out of a bad experience within Christian faith. Many of them are reacting to some of that—particularly for those guys who are scientists, [they are reacting] to the anti-evolutionism that is in churches. Regrettably, the church has been its own worst enemy historically in terms of flinging people away who are asking honest questions.

Host: As you were just talking, it reminded me of a question I had just got at a program that I was delivering last week. Somebody was asking me about why I sometimes refer to myself as a [Christian naturalist](#) or an evolutionary Pentecostal. This is an odd mixing of words for many people.

Denis: There is a group of us who are Pentecostal, and we call ourselves “signs and wonders evolutionary biologists.” Of course, for you that would make perfect sense, right? *[laughter]* We are all Pentecostal, we have all experienced divine action, and we are also biologists who see that evolution is definitely a fact.

Host: This evolutionary perspective that I am offering: What does that *do* to someone for whom an intimate personal relationship with God is vital? I can only speak to my own experience. When I believed that God was a kind of supreme watchmaker outside this clockwork universe, or a supreme landlord who resided off the planet and outside the universe, *prayer* for me at that time was petitioning a divine being up there, out there, fully transcendent, to miraculously intervene according to how ever I was praying. But now that we have this nested, emergent understanding—subatomic particles within atoms, within molecules, within cells, within organisms—and this [14 billion year unfolding of grace and creativity](#), I see prayer as like Russian nesting dolls. For me, now, prayer is like a cell in the body in communion with the very body of which it is a part. It’s just so much more of an *intimate* relationship than I ever had before.

Denis: Prayer for me is happening all day long, basically. It’s like there’s a conversation going on. I will be working on some paper, for example, and ask, “Lord, what do I make of this?” There’s this sense of the divine being there, encouraging and offering insights. Where these ideas come from sometimes just scares me: Where did that come from? I don’t mind saying: I believe that God just comes in and mysteriously, miraculously gives insights, connections, and little coincidences along the way. You think, “Alright. There is something being said here.” And, sure as heck, I get blessed by these things.

Host: Me, too. . . Denis, I want to come back to a question that I asked at the beginning—but in a different way. I can hear in your voice, I see it in the presentations that you have online, and I can read it in your book: Clearly, you don’t just *tolerate* an evolutionary worldview. You don’t

just *reconcile* evolution and science and evidence with your faith. It's a mutually enriching process for you. I am curious about that. So say a little more about your testimonial, about how that happens specifically. Talk about how our best scientific understanding of cosmic, Earth, and biological and human history not only doesn't threaten your faith —it positively expands it.

Denis: Well, remember: as an evangelical Christian, your first move is always, what do you do with the text? I had a dramatic conversion experience as a 25-year-old. It's not like there were bells, angels, or anything. I, like many, (and I'm sure you've heard this story before) read [the Gospel of John](#), and it changed my life forever.

Host: Let me interrupt. Before you go on, I want you to flesh that out. What was your life like? What were you struggling with prior to that? The reason I'm asking is that I know it parallels some of my own experience. I want our listeners to be able to really feel into, What was your life like before, and then what happened, and what was your life like afterwards?

Denis: If the listeners want to see a picture of me, they can go to my online web lecture entitled "[My Personal Story](#)" (14-minute YouTube version, [here](#)). There's a picture online of me graduating in 1978 from dental school. I am the center of this party of guys, and you're seeing me there with this massive toothbrush in one hand and a Bacardi and Coke in the other. I look like the happiest guy in the world. The culture was telling me, "Get yourself a job that makes a lot of money. Get yourself a job that allows you to have a lot of free time." (I mean, are you hearing the word dentistry?) "Party as hard as you can, and drive fast cars." It was 1978, so you can imagine what I bought myself: a silver anniversary L-82 Corvette. I played golf to nearly a scratch handicap and played college hockey. I did all the stuff that would make me happy.

Now if you look at this picture, you will see this guy laughing his head off. But if you could pour a little truth serum in me, get the friends away from me, and ask "What's up?", I saw the vanity of it all. I use the expression, "the elastic snapped around my head." I was on my way to [Nicosia, Cyprus](#), to do U.N. peace-keeping duty with a regiment; I was going to be the regimental dentist for 500 men. On the way going to Cyprus, we all met in [Ottawa](#), and then we're hopping over to [Lahr, Germany](#), where we would spend three days before travelling to Cyprus. I always remember: It was in the middle of October 1979 and it was a Wednesday night, just before we're flying out on Thursday. This was a good reason to go for a party, because this would be the last time we would be in Canada in the '70s.

I ran into a bunch of guys called [Newfoundlanders](#). In Canada, there is this island way out to the east. If you have to describe what a Newfoundlander is, they're sort of like Louisiana guys. They have their own special bayou-type of moonshine called "screech." Of course, coming from western Canada—in particular, Alberta, which is like Texas; we're cowboys up here—I thought I was going to show these boys how to drink. Michael, I only have flashes of coming out of that party. I want to tell you how sick I was; it was just awful. I only have flashes of someone putting my uniform on. I have flashes of crossing the Atlantic, being in that jet. And

then I spent three days in Germany—the first time I was ever in Europe—I couldn’t get out of bed. *[laughter]* (I think you probably played the scenario yourself, right?) And it was then I asked the question: “Is *this* the way it’s going to be for the rest of my life?”

So there was a deep angst that there was something wrong. I will also say that the way I was treating women—if anyone treated my sister that way, I would phone up my three brothers, and we would go find this guy and lay a licking on him. There was duplicity. I mean, being involved with married women. But, remember: This is what my worldview was saying: “I’m nothing but an animal. Don’t talk about the sacred; it doesn’t exist.” And if you’re an animal, what you do is propagate—and that’s all there is to it.

So when I got to Cyprus after the three days of being sick on that major drunk—I mean, had played that before, but never as drunk as that. It *scared* me. “Do I have a problem?” I asked myself. So, I just didn’t drink for a couple of weeks—and it’s like a miracle. I started reading the Gospel of John. I have no idea why a Bible followed me there. Today, I would say it was by grace that I started reading the Gospel of John. It’s just a simple conversion. It’s just these deep twangs in my heart that seem to echo so true. And there are many people who have gone that route, who converted as adults because of the Gospel of John.

To add a psychological component to this, I had a deep sense of being unclean. There is no other way to describe it. I knew that the lifestyle I was involved in was wrong. In fact, I watch shows on PBS and stories of young girls who are doing tricks as prostitutes; they come back from the street and they stand under the shower for an hour. I mean you’re not going to get any physically cleaner, but there’s a massive statement being made there. They want to be clean—and *that* was what I wanted. I wanted holiness. I wanted cleansing. I don’t know how; I can’t describe it completely. All I can say is in that six-month period, through reading the Gospel of John, my whole world was completely tipped upside down—in a sense of peace, a sense of joy, and, in particular, a sense of cleanliness throughout my soul. So, that was the start of it.

The irony of all this is: the guy who went to Cyprus to be a peacekeeper ended up needing the ultimate Prince of Peace, the ultimate peacekeeper. If you were to ask my friends about who I was before Cyprus and after Cyprus, it’s like night and day. Then the process started, in terms of What was God’s calling?

Host: That’s great! Thank you so much for sharing that story, and with the passion that you did. . . For myself, there was sort of a second conversion, which was the conversion from being an anti-evolutionary creationist to wholeheartedly embracing an evolutionary worldview—and in a way that gave me a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. How did *that* shift, that second piece of the testimonial, how did that happen for you?

Denis: I’m just like you, Michael, though maybe I’d wrestle with you a little on using the word “conversion” for it. My conversion to Christ came in Cyprus, and everything has been static since then, in terms of my love for Jesus. As I wrote in my book, the love I had for Jesus as a Young Earth Creationist is identical to the love I have today as an Evolutionary Creationist.

Nevertheless, my process started when I wanted to be an anti-evolutionist. The first move was the deconstruction at Regent College doing *Genesis* 1–11 and realizing there’s an ancient cosmology there. So, this might sound rather shocking: I left Young Earth Creationism for *Biblical reasons*. There are many elements in *Genesis* 1–11 that point away from the Young Earth Creationism model. So I left Regent in 1987 and went on to do a PhD at the University of Toronto. At that time, I’m still an anti-evolutionist, but I’m no longer a Young Earth Creationist. But then I looked at [the Princetonians](#), which are the first generation after Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*—all these Evangelicals had no trouble absorbing Darwin’s views. Moreover, I studied Darwin’s religious views. Darwin gave me some amazing reasons on how you could connect God within evolution. He is not this atheist. Richard Dawkins has done a shameful, shameful exposition of Darwin’s views, which is simply outrageous. And it angers me on how he leads people astray on Darwin’s beliefs.

So, at the end of that PhD, I had the skill set hermeneutically—that is, in terms of the Biblical text, realizing it is not a book of science. I also had the philosophical approaches to say that evolution could be teleological—that is, that God could be behind it. At that point, I have five university degrees, but still no job. *[laughter]* (Isn’t that encouraging to all the students out there?) But I’m on my knees—and this is where I deeply resonate with you—God is intimate with us all the time. And God just basically said, “Well, if you want to get into this origins debate, how much science do you really know?” And I answer, “Lord, I’m a dentist. I know how to fix teeth. I’m not an evolutionary biologist.”

However, because I know a lot of tooth stuff, I can go into a PhD in evolution of teeth and jaws. So I went into that program as an anti-evolutionist, still with the vision of attacking evolutionary biology. However, if the evidence would show that evolution was true, then I was going to go in that direction. And after three-and-half-years, two things I found out: Number one, all evolutionists in the university are not a bunch of raging lunatics that are atheists, like Richard Dawkins. Of course, there are many who are atheists. But the chair of the department I worked in was Reverend Dr. David Payton—who was an evangelical Anglican. It’s not like they’re all raging atheists trying to destroy people’s faith. In fact, when some people realized I had a Christian background, they were sending their Christian students to me to help them come to terms with it.

The second thing I saw after three-and-a-half-years of trying to do counter-origins for evolution—I was like the little boy at the dike. I could plug this argument with this leak, and another little leak, till finally, after three-and-a-half years, I put my hands up in the air and I said, “You know, when they talk about [evolution—the evidence for it being overwhelming](#); it is mind-blowingly overwhelming.” In fact, the evidence that hit me the hardest came in the early ‘90s in this new subdiscipline in biology called “[evo-devo](#),” or [evolutionary developmental biology](#), which is simply this: Small changes in developmental mechanisms can result in large morphological changes.

So, I had the mechanism and I saw the pattern with the teeth, which is full and complete. It was at the end of that when I put my hands up in the air, rolled my eyes, and I said to the Lord, “Well, my evangelical tradition has done the following: It has given me a really lousy

approach to how to interpret the opening chapters of *Genesis*. It is absolutely abysmal in terms of dealing with the evolutionary evidence. (How often have I heard Evangelicals say we evolve from monkeys? No evolutionary biologist in the world believes that.) Evangelicals just do not know the evidence, regrettably. However, Evangelicalism brought me to the foot of the Cross, and for that I'll be forever grateful. For that, I will always be an Evangelical to help Evangelicals come over this problem.

Because, if they don't to come to terms with this . . . and Evangelicals know this right now: Evangelicals who go to public universities, by the end of their fourth year of college, 50% of them have lost their faith. The evolution issue, the science issue, is one reason. Unless we start addressing this properly, we're going to lose an entire generation of kids simply because we have not done our homework—both in the science and, in particular, in the Scripture.

Host: Amen, brother. I just have so much love and gratitude for you right this moment. *[laughter]* Wow! I'm so glad you're doing the work you're doing. When you were just talking about that we evolved from monkeys and people react to that, it reminded me of a quote from a dear friend of mine, [Marlin Lavanhar](#), who is a pastor of a large church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He said, "You know, we've all heard some fundamentalist-minded person say, 'Don't tell me I'm related to monkeys!' But now that we understand DNA and its code, we know that we are not just related to monkeys; we're related to zucchini. So let's get over it!" *[laughter]*

Denis: That's right. We're related to all of that, absolutely. So when people talk about, Where's the evolutionary evidence? Goodness gracious! I was in [Harvard](#) about a month ago. A wonderful Christian group had invited me. When the question period opened up, a young person asked me, "[Where is all the evidence for evolution?](#)" I mean, I just melted down! I'm in the greatest university in the world; this kid is going to this university and, not only that, Harvard has the greatest university library.

So I said, "It's in your library! There are scads of evidence! Not only that, you have an outstanding natural history museum. In fact, you have a Christian club here." I could point out to a number of the students I met that "there are both evolutionary biologists and wonderful evangelical Christians who can help you." But the point which shook me is that this kid had enough talent to make it to Harvard and he still asked the question.

And I was asked another question: Someone was saying, "Well, when it comes to carbon-14, we really can't trust it for dating the Earth." And, of course, that's sort of like the "we evolved from monkeys" line. Carbon-14 does not date the age of Earth; it has a half-life of 5,700 years. So after ten half-lives, you've almost got nothing left—so you've got a range of only 50,000 years in terms of the distance of radiometric dating for that. There still is a lot of work to be done, especially within my community, on this issue.

Host: I was interviewed maybe a-year-and-a-half ago now by a Young Earth creationist. He just kept repeating, like a mantra: "There is no evidence for evolution; there is no evidence for evolution." At one point I thought to myself, "If there is only one thing I'm going to do this

week, it's going to be to compile on one page the links to all of the best resources—books, Wikipedia pages, whatever—that actually are the best articulations of the evidence, including the books that I have found most inspiring that show how evolution and the history of the universe can be understood in profoundly inspiring ways. So I created a webpage called “Best Evolution Resources.” To this day, if you type “[best evolution resources](#)” in Google, my page is the first thing that comes up. The first entries on the page are the resources that counter exactly the point that you had to address: about there supposedly being no evidence for evolution.

Denis: I like that word you used, *mantra*. Indeed, there are mantras out there given in the Sunday schools and—I also hate to say it—within the Christian Clubs at universities, like [Campus Crusade](#) and the [InterVarsities](#). Regrettably, these kids are being hurt by that. We, the evangelical world in particular, need to equip these club leaders. You know, the Campus Crusade guys: they are wonderful Christians. They see the need for a ministry on campuses—public universities in particular—but they have to be equipped with the facts.

The fact that they keep saying that there's no evidence for evolution: I mean, that is patently false. It's staggering! I mean, is there overwhelming evidence for evolution? Goodness gracious: there is! Do we see it in the fossils? Absolutely! It's the molecular stuff, now too. As you say, we share the same genetic path as the zucchini. It's all there! And it's not a threat to my dignity. As a traditional Christian, I've [accepted] the evolutionary process and human evolution. Somewhere through the process we start bearing the image of God. Somewhere through the process we become morally culpable. And somewhere through the process, we all fall into sin and fall short of the glory of God.

Host: I think this might be one of the areas where you and I have a different understanding. I have done a lot in recent years with [evolutionary psychology and evolutionary brain science](#) (also [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#))—the notion that our instincts don't match the world that we today have to live in. Our instincts match a world in which our ancestors *used* to live in and helped them to survive long enough to reproduce in that kind of world. Today, we're living in a world where we are surrounded by what is called “[supernormal stimuli](#)”—that is, all of these substances (drugs, alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, video games, shopping, internet pornography and on and on and on) that our brains are programmed to *want*. We have this instinctual craving for supernormal stimuli, once we're exposed to them. Our instincts are mismatched for living in a world surrounded by supernormal stimuli. Yet it would have been impossible for people 2,000 or 3,000 years ago to have had any understanding of our evolved brain or evolved nature.

So, I see [the Fall of Adam and Eve and Original Sin as profoundly accurate intuitions about the nature of our fallen state](#), to use that traditional language, about the nature of our mismatch. Our rational brains are actually going to get us further into problems if we try to rely on them.

Denis: Believe it or not, Michael, I'm resonating with you completely. I think the next adventure is to do evolutionary psychology from a theistic perspective. So, when I look at my 56-year-old body, and despite the fact it's a 56-year-old body, it's a body that was geared for a different time. I mean, cultural evolution has gone so quickly.

So, do I have some deep instincts? Let's take the example of sex, which is always provocative and at the same time something we can connect on. Is there an innate tendency within me to want to propagate with many women? The answer is, absolutely! That's my evolutionary past, and it's always there. Another example is wonderful, fatty hamburgers. I could just become a glutton and a real doughboy if I didn't discipline myself. I mean, the problem today is that we've got Safeway, McDonald's, and Burger King all around us.

So, when I look at us from an evolutionary psychological perspective, and I think of things like Original Sin—and, of course, Augustine cast it within an atom; but that was the science of the day for everyone. The more important thing is that there is this proclivity to sin. Is it there, crouched at your door? As says it in [Genesis 4:7](#), sin is crouching at the door and it wants to have you.

Is that tendency there all the time? My answer is, yes. But at the same time, I think we have also crossed a barrier by which we can have command over this—if we so choose.

I believe in free will. So, is there a battle with my will and, say, my Neolithic body? The answer is, yes. And it's deeply, deeply embedded in my neocortex. It's not like this thing is going to disappear. Rather, it is going to be a challenge. I think that makes it exciting, in terms of: Can we take this Neolithic body and now can we glorify the Lord through it?

Host: For me, one of the biggest pieces of freedom that I gained from a God-honoring evolutionary understanding was the shift from confusion about my nature, self-judgment, and guilt—to *gratitude*. If my ancestors had not had these same proclivities—the same “unchosen nature” (that's the way I sometimes speak about it)—*if they didn't have that, I wouldn't be alive today!* (See a 15-minute video clip interview with Rev. Dowd on this subject, [here](#).)

Denis: Bingo! You are absolutely right. If they didn't have that, we wouldn't be here.

Host: That is one of the pieces that I didn't get from my traditional evangelical upbringing, because the Biblical story in *Genesis* interpreted literally didn't lend itself to *having gratitude for my sinful nature*. But when I was able to find that deep appreciation for my instincts and, to use religious language, “to give God glory” about, “Oh, yes! This was necessary to be alive!” — paradoxically, I find it is infinitely easier to live in integrity. Part of the reason is because I can have a lightness. For example, when I see an attractive woman now, I get this little inner chuckle: “Well, of course, I think she should be carrying my baby!” But I don't act on it.
[laughter]

Denis: I'm resonating with you 110 percent! Here's another example: When school starts in September and it's still really warm—well, you know how these kids dress today. Skirts up to their butts, their belly buttons sticking out—and I've got to make my way to my office. I will not lie to you—I think you [understand what I mean]. I don't think about looking at them to make babies; I don't even think of babies. I think of *other things*. But, like you, [for me] it's haunting. I laugh at myself because I know what that is! It is simply my evolutionary past.

So the next move is I tell myself: "Go to your office. You're not going to do anything stupid. And, by God's grace, nothing like that has happened in 30 years. I'm proud to say publicly that I am a celibate. People call me a liar on this—but now, when I get that little flash, I just go in the other direction.

At the same time, it also is part of how one manages one's life. I'm actually speaking from home here today, because in my office at school there is too much banging of doors and stuff like that. But I do not have Internet at home. I am a single man; I don't want to abuse that. I have heard stories of people completely destroying their lives. I mean, was I involved in *porn* before becoming a Christian? Absolutely. I know that it's like *visual crack cocaine*. I don't want to take the chance on this.

You and I: we now understand where this almost irrational impulse comes from. It *had* to be irrational for us to get here, from an evolutionary perspective. It is still there. And then, God allows us to make a decision—and, for me, the decision is: *Don't put yourself in positions where you are going to let [the animal past](#) take over.*

Host: Yes. [Connie Barlow](#), my wife, is a science writer, and she was saying something just the other day right along those lines—that our free will (to use that kind of language), our choice-making: where it's perhaps most important is the environments that we put ourselves in. The contexts we put ourselves in, the people we hang out with, the choices that we make (to have an internet at home or whatever): these matter because we are shaped by our environment. That's what we are evolutionarily programmed to do. That is what all creatures do. And yet, we *can* have choice about the kinds of environments we put ourselves in. And that can make a huge difference in the quality of our lives, the quality of our relationships, the integrity.

Again, because I feel comfortable using language of revelation and revelatory: for me, what God has been revealing through evolutionary psychology and evolutionary brain science is this deeper understanding of what could only have been revealed in the way that it was revealed 2,000 years ago or 3,000 years ago. There is this progressive revelation—what I sometimes call "[public revelation](#)"—that God is revealing things *publicly* now through the whole worldwide scientific community, even among scientists who don't recognize God or use God language. Those of us who *do* have the eyes of faith can see scientific discoveries in a sacred way—as gifts of grace.

Denis: I am a two books guy: the book of God's words and the book of God's works. I'll use the words of [Galileo](#): "*Science is a gift from God.*" Galileo wrote that in the letter to Christina.

You used another term, “progressive revelation”—and I’m with you. As Christians, we see this in the Scriptures: The moment we talk about Old Testament and New Testament, and when we talk about Jesus and fulfillment, there is a *progressive revelation* going on.

I think it is a much more magnificent creation as an *evolved creation* than as God creating a static, three-tier creation. There *is* a progressive element—and I think we see that in our own personal growth. That’s what it is: we have spiritual growth. We all experience that. And so, we *collectively* have this—you used the term “[public revelation](#).” I can resonate with that quite deeply; I can be on that page.

Host: That’s awesome! Well, what I’m realizing, Denis, in this conversation is that I could talk to you for another few hours! *[laughter]* But I want to begin to wind down by coming back to what was my original, three-fold intention for [this teleseminar series](#). The first intention, of course, is to simply show in a compelling way, in as many different voices as possible, that humanity’s collective intelligence—that is, our best scientific understanding of physical evolution, biological evolution, and cultural evolution—can be understood in a way that not only doesn’t have to threaten faith; it can enrich, strengthen, and then deepen it. You have been a shining example of that on this call.

The second intention came out of a frustration. It seems like the media mostly portray the two groups that each tend to speak with one voice. On the one hand, you’ve got the [New Atheists: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, PZ Myers, Jerry Coyne](#). They are speaking pretty much with one voice. On the other end of the spectrum, you’ve got the [Young Earth creationists](#), your [Biblical literalists](#). So, you’ve got the religion-rejecting atheists on the one end and science-rejecting creationists on the other. Yet the media rarely report on the *millions in the middle* who are represented by all the different speakers that are part of this series. I think one of the reasons why is, perhaps, that it has not been easy for us to speak with one voice—because we *do* have a lot of differences. We have a lot of theological differences, some metaphysical differences, differences in practice, and that sort of thing.

So what might be a *core commons*? Is there anything that we can say with one voice, or where we can agree in terms of our values? I want to offer, sort of as a first draft and to have you just share your honest feedback on it, what I *think* we all can say: that we all value *evidential deep-time eyes*. Not just *mythic* deep-time eyes, like in the Hindu tradition; but an *evidential* deep-time understanding that comes from evidence.

My sense is that we all have what I call a “global heart”—a commitment not just to the sake of our nation-state, or to our religious group, or to our own soul salvation (not to deny those). But our commitment *expands* to also have us committed to the health and wellbeing of the entire Earthly life project, and that evolution should be continuing healthy ways.

Denis: I totally agree with you. I am with you on these first two tenets; I’m with you completely. Keep going.

Host: Well, that's pretty much it. I *had* been languaging it in a three-fold way: deep time eyes, a global heart, and a valuing of evidence as divine communication. But I'm not sure that I'm going to get buy-in on the last one—so that's why I have rephrased it as “evidential deep-time eyes and a global heart and commitment.”

Denis: I can quite resonate with that. I will make a qualification, however. I have read your material and you've have read mine. We do have some theological differences, and I am happy to say *I am a Bible-thumping Evangelical*. I preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am an exclusivist in the following sense—and this is a statement of faith: I think that when it is all over, I'm going to be standing at the gates before Jesus. I might be wrong on that. And if I'm wrong on that, my second hypothesis is that I'm going to be standing before someone who is the God of love.

If there are two things in this universe—if we are going to talk about apologetics and evidentiary sorts of arguments—then, argument number one is all the design in nature. And not design in the sense of the way the Intelligent Design guys have messed up the word. The design is simply a belief that when I look at the beauty, complexity, and functionality in nature—in particular in biology—I get a deep inkling that something is behind it. And the fact that Richard Dawkins should write a book trying to respond to that as an atheist says that *something hits us very hard*.

My second element is the four-letter word, l-o-v-e. I find love to be the most amazing and powerful force in the universe. I love it! It's mysterious, and I attribute it to a God who is ultimately the God of love. Now, of course, as a Christian—and here's my exclusive claim: Religions across the board certainly deal with love. But if there is one thing that hits me about Christianity—let's say, the Gospel of John—it is that *God is love*. It is that manifestation that God so loves us that he would die for us.

Now, when it comes to making Christianity *inclusive*, I am not like these typical Evangelicals who hold that if you don't say the four spiritual laws, you are going to hell. Goodness gracious! That is certainly not the God of the Bible who would do something like that. So, if we've all been created in the image of God—including atheists—we *all* are certainly going to be able to experience the *creative impulse* (that God is our creator) and also the *loving impulse*.

And so, in that regard, I think God meets us wherever we happen to be. Salvation is not a multiple-choice exam. Salvation is an existential reality. For me personally (and it is a personal inclusive move), I find my salvation in Jesus. Now, is it possible I might change that position? I leave all doors open. But personally, this is the account that makes the most sense for me.

Host: *[laughter]* A deep bow to you, brother!

Denis: Amen.

Host: A new phrase came to mind as you started that. When you said you were unabashedly a Bible-thumping Evangelical, I thought, “Wow! [I am an evidence-thumping Evangelical](#), too!”

Denis: Yes. Well, you are! You are using the word *evangelical* in a very generic sense. I’m with you. Absolutely!

Host: [laughter] Yes! Well, I greatly look forward to meeting you in person and furthering this conversation. My gut hunch tells me this is the first conversation of many. There is a decent possibility that you will be a friend for life.

Denis: It has been an absolute treat—and thanks for the opportunity and the privilege, and all the best to your wife, Connie.

Host: Great. Well, thank you, Denis. Take care.

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