

Richard Rohr

“Radical Grace and Evolutionary Spirituality”

Episode 15 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity
EvolutionaryChristianity.com

Note: *The 38 interviews in this series were recorded in December 2010 and January 2011.*

Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 15 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](#). Please do join the conversation.

Today, our featured guest is [Richard Rohr](#). [Richard](#) is a [Franciscan](#) who founded the [Center for Action and Contemplation](#). He is a contributing editor for [Sojourners](#) magazine and also a contributor to [Tikkun](#) magazine. He’s the author of many books, including, [The Naked Now: Learning to See As the Mystics See](#), [Why Be Catholic?](#), and [Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life](#). He is also the creator of [a wide range of courses and programs](#) on audio and video.

Here we talk about “Radical Grace and Evolutionary Spirituality.” You’ll see why Richard is revered by people across the theological spectrum.

Host: Hello, Richard Rohr. Thanks for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Richard: I’m glad to be with you. Thank you.

Host: I’m glad you’re with us, too, because I have been tracking you for about twenty years. This is the first real conversation that we’ve had, but you’ve been an older brother on the path for at least two decades. What I’ve found particularly valuable about your ministry over the years is the way that you consistently come from a place of grace, of generosity, of soul, of spirit, in such a way that you’re one of the leaders that really appeals to a wide variety of Christians. I’m wondering if you could share with our listeners just a little bit of your story, your testimonial: how you came to your current embrace of both your faith and an evolutionary understanding of reality.

Richard: Wow! Where do I start? Well, thank you first of all for giving me this opportunity. You know, I was raised [a pre-Vatican II Catholic](#) in the 1940s and 50s. I went off to join the Franciscans as a young man. And I joined them at a very good time, where we were moving

through the reforms of the [Second Vatican Council](#). The man who educated me had been sent off to Rome and Europe, and he came back and really gave us good philosophy and good theology. He taught us how to think and how to use the tradition, not just to spout clichés, but how to integrate scripture and tradition and experience.

So I was given this great big gift. And from there, it just started moving, with all that great education. My second year as a priest I was put in charge of the retreat program for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. The very first retreat I ever gave, to a bunch of 19-year-old jocks who didn't really want to be there, they experienced what the [Pentecostal](#) folks would call the [Baptism in the Spirit](#) while I was preaching. I mean, I didn't consider myself [Charismatic](#), but it led me into what became the New Jerusalem Community. I was called the founder and the father figure. But all I did was try to catch up with what clearly was happening. I wasn't creating what everybody thought I was. What it taught me, early in the '70s, was what the Franciscans had taught me on one level but now was experiential. It was that such a thing as spiritual experience was truly possible, and it wasn't all in the head.

So I think that really helped me put together head and heart. From there, things just moved. I moved out here to New Mexico in 1986 to found the Center. It's called the [Center for Action and Contemplation](#), and it's been here 24 years. We're trying to help people put those two together: their active engagement in the world and in the issues of our time, with a deeper contemplative experience. So my life has unfolded in ways I never planned. But in some ways *how* it happened felt organic. And I know I never expected this. I just tried to keep listening to the next step, and it was always there. So I've had a wonderful life. I've been here in New Mexico now for 24 years, almost 25.

Host: You're in a beautiful part of New Mexico, too—Albuquerque.

Richard: Yes, I sure am.

Host: Richard, I'm wondering could you say a little bit more about the mission and ministry of the [Center for Action and Contemplation](#).

Richard: Well, when I was still in Cincinnati, because of [a set of recordings](#) I'd made on the Old Testament and New Testament, I started getting invited to give retreats all over the world. Again and again, I saw the tremendous social needs of our time and our world. And yet to be perfectly honest, I often was disappointed in some of the responses that I found, which I would now call dualistic thinking, either-or thinking, all or nothing thinking. I found [dualistic thinking](#) to be as much on the Left as it was on the Right. It was just a different vocabulary, but it still always split the universe into the good guys and the bad guys—totally right or totally wrong.

So you can see why this set me up for the issue you're addressing: this whole unnecessary split between religion and evolution. It doesn't make any sense to me why it should even be a problem. But I was forced, then, into both-and thinking, simply by reason of working with people who were trying to do the same thing. And that's what the Center is about.

So we call it this long, cumbersome title, the [Center for Action and Contemplation](#)—but I always say that the most important word in the title is *and*.

In my last book I wrote a whole poem called *And* because that seems to me what wisdom always comes to, what the contemplative mind can always see. The contemplative mind doesn't create unnecessary dualisms. It doesn't create unnecessary problems. And for me, that's been the great loss to Western Christianity, that we don't *know* that. We've almost got a PhD in creating either-or thinking. It makes you an expert in saying "but...but...but" instead of "and." I would say that's become the undertone to almost all the things I try to teach: a kind of recognition of the contemplative mind and that when you bring that to the social issues, you just have much greater wisdom and much greater patience when you don't have immediate success.

Host: Yeah. I have often said that liberals who trash conservatives and conservatives who trash liberals—neither one of them really *gets* evolution, because evolution is a dance of a conserving element and a liberating element. I mean, DNA is conservative! It holds onto that which worked in the past, that which was vital to the stability or the survivability or whatever of the organism or the society. And that's an essential component of any society or any being, for that matter. But there's also a need for that which transcends what has been before, that which pushes the boundaries of the possible, expands the circles of inclusion. And this progressive or liberal element is also essential to evolution. Both are necessary. This has precisely been your ability—not just your ability to do it personally, but in your teaching. You're constantly bringing people back to both-and thinking, to get out of the dualisms. It's not either-or. It's most often a larger whole that can embrace both—and both have some role in the body.

What I value is the combination of that, and the fact that you have placed a lot of emphasis on orality, the oral mode of communication of information. There's something powerful that we've lost in a modern society when we no longer pay attention to the words that are *spoken*, for example, teachings that come across in audiocassettes or audio programs that we can listen to, and then we create our own images. It's different from reading a book; it's different from watching a video. I know you've done those as well, but I remember my first introduction to you was through a friend of mine who gave me a copy of the audiocassette tapes of [your teaching on the Enneagram](#). It was my first introduction to the [Enneagram](#) as a way of thinking about human differences. And of course that model itself has been useful to so many people in helping us to move beyond thinking that other people are fundamentally flawed because they're not like us. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about some of the audio programs that have been particularly well received in the world.

Richard: Well, the *Enneagram* was a big one, even though I've never considered that my main subject. But it exemplified that "your gift is your sin—and your sin is your gift," and you can't have one without the other. And don't take your gift too seriously, because it carries a dark side. You know, that is both-and thinking. But also for Christians, trying to put together Old Testament and New Testament and recognizing that it really wasn't "old" at all. Jesus was a

Jew, and unless we honor his Judaism, we really don't understand Christianity. So the same thing just kept recurring of what you said: both-and thinking. I tried to do the same with Paul, to recognize he falls into moralism, but he's also a mystic of the first magnitude. And you might get upset about some of his moralistic lines, but *don't throw out the baby with the bath water*. Paul has a lot to give us. If Christianity didn't have Paul's whole tour de force on the law, we'd be totally legalistic, totally moralistic.

The book I just wrote is on the two halves of life. *It's going to come out in March. I call it [Falling Upward](#). And again, it's the same thing. We need the first half, but you can't stop there. You have to integrate that with what I call the tasks and the goals of the second half of life. And that's my big disappointment in so much of organized religion. I've been a priest forty years now, and it seems to me we keep doing the tasks of the first half of life over and over and over again.*

Host: *What are those—the tasks of the first half?*

Richard: *Well, it's basically giving yourself an important identity, a sense of boundaries, some impulse control, some laws, some structure, some importance. You've got to do that. I guess the psychologists would say it's building your ego structure. But then when you go to the second half of life, and you're still just trying to prove that my ego is better than yours, or I'm bigger than you or stronger than you or smarter than you or holier than you, it just starts dying on the vine.*

Host: *So I'm curious, How would you describe in a nutshell the second half of life?*

Richard: If the first half of life is creating your container, then the second half of life is “What are the contents?” What's this container meant to hold? So what breaks through is much more tolerance for ambiguity, which we would call compassion or mercy or forgiveness in Christian language, or patience. I mean, all the things we idealize as Christian virtues really necessitate a certain forgiveness of reality for not being perfect—for not being what we needed to be or what we wanted to be. You see that God is so comfortable with diversity and multiplicity and breaking the rules with an ever-new kind of animal or new kind of tree or new kind of plant, one that follows a different set of rules. If you just observe reality you'll see that God is very patient, very creative.

So the second half of life takes on those kinds of virtues that would allow us to love our enemies, for example. We can all be taught, as we are in Christianity, to love our enemies. But you and I both know that many sincere people, well-intended people, would believe that Jesus taught them to do that, but they have no software or inner ability to know how to do that.

So, that's what you learn in the second half of life, which I summarize as contemplative thinking or [nondualistic thinking](#). It allows you to be merciful, graceful, compassionate.

Host: That's great. It matches my own experience. I'm 52 years old and I've noticed over the course of the last decade, especially the last eight years, just a softening of my inside—my feminine side, my less arrogant side. I'm less dogmatic and sure. It's flowered just in these last eight to ten years in ways that just were not the case in my twenties and thirties.

Richard: You can't do that when you're in your twenties and thirties. You've got to keep solidifying your identity: "Why I'm important, why I'm successful, why I'm good, why I'm...." By my age (I'm 67) that's just not an interesting question. *[laughter]* It's like, "Oh go away, Richard!" It's proving that you're better than somebody else or you're saved more than somebody else. You don't have time for it anymore. It's never true anyway.

Host: Right. And so this is a book that's going to be coming out soon, called *Falling Upward*?

Richard: [*Falling Upward: The Spirituality of the Two Halves of Life*](#). It should come out in March 2011.

Host: That's great! Richard, I was really glad that you mentioned that when we observe reality, when we pay attention to what's real, we can have our understanding and experience of God enriched. And I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about how an evolutionary understanding of reality, an evidential understanding of reality—that is, a science-based understanding of reality—has made a difference in your own faith walk.

Richard: Wow! You know, Michael, it's become almost foundational. If what's happening is evolving, then of course you've never *got* it. It keeps you with a beginner's mind. It keeps you with that kind of humility: an expectation of an open horizon. I think the bane of religion (and not just Christianity) has been this closing down of such openness way too early, because of the assumption that "I understand; I know!" And I think this is the arrogance that so many people have come to resent in religious people—not just Christians, in other religions too.

Host: Yes.

Richard: 'Knowing' in the mystics was always balanced with 'unknowing.' And that putting together of knowing with unknowing is for me the very heart of biblical faith. Now when you eliminate all unknowing and make it all knowing—as in, "I'm certain about everything and I understand everything"—in my opinion, you're outside the realm of biblical faith. You no longer have people who are humble or in awe before reality. What an evolutionary perspective does is necessitate that you're always in kindergarten, you're always in awe, you're always expecting more. You're always allowing God to be mystery. You never assume that you totally understand.

If religion had approached the world in that way, I think the whole world would love religious people. But we're not loved today. We expect people to be split—which makes you into a hypocrite because, once you're split, you *have* to be a hypocrite. And it's not even our fault. We are just doing what everybody else told us the religious project is. You know, I had to study Latin during my time in the seminary, and I love to quote [Augustine](#). He said in Latin, *Si comprehenderit non est Deus*—“If you comprehend it, it's not God.” And we've walked around for centuries acting as if God is in our pocket. There's no notion of [Incarnation](#), of the deep meaning of time and unfolding and mystery.

Host: Yes.

Richard: So I'm profoundly grateful for any evolutionary understanding. I think it returns us to the mystical level of all religion, and that's where all the power is at.

Host: When you were sharing that, two things came to mind. One of them is the importance that I've found in [Sallie McFague](#)'s work on metaphors and models of God: that all of our language for God is necessarily interpretive. It's metaphorical. When we concretize, we essentially make an idol of any particular languaging or image of the divine. We then step out of the unknowing into this certainty, into what we *think* we know. We actually *trivialize* the divine to the degree that we do that. Staying in that place of uncertainty, of unknowing, of not being sure, is actually a humility-engendering process.

The other thing it reminded me of is [Jennifer Michael Hecht](#)'s book, [Doubt: A History of Unbelief](#). Through the whole of human history (or at least its recorded writing through the philosophers and theologians) she looked at the importance of not knowing, the importance of questioning, of not being overconfident, and of doubt and uncertainty. This uncertainty, or doubt, is also a spiritually necessary characteristic for us to continue on the edge of growing.

Richard: Well put. Remember a few years ago when the public press was shocked that Mother Teresa was suffering from so much doubt? The very fact that they were so shocked by this tells me how far we've moved from the biblical tradition. In my opinion, she reflected the highest level of religion—and that is this living in partial darkness. We localized the whole act of faith so much in the head that doubt became an intellectual dilemma. That's not where it's localized. It's much bigger than that.

Host: Yes, Yes. Richard, I wonder if you could also share a little bit more about your deep-time understanding of grace. Grace has been such a central concept to your own work—this notion of “[radical grace](#).” Could you speak a little bit to what would radical grace in evolutionary spirituality mean to you?

Richard: That's the name of our magazine: [Radical Grace](#). I went back to a quote I used early on where I said, everything in the world is predictable. There's one thing that's truly radical, that gets to the root—and that is grace itself, which breaks all the rules. Because I'm a Christian, I believe that the great trump card of Christianity is the mystery that we call Incarnation. We believe the spiritual world became flesh in Jesus. It became human, actually became material and physical. And the hiding place, or the revelation place, of God is the material world. Now if what I believe is true, then the human Incarnation began 2,000 years ago. But the mystery of the enfleshment of Spirit began approximately 13.7 *billion* years ago. That's the *real* birth of Christ. Now if you say that to Christians, they're shocked. So I point them to the [prologue to John's Gospel](#), the [hymn in the beginning of Colossians](#), the [hymn in the beginning of Ephesians](#), and the [first chapter of the first letter of John](#). These passages all say, without any equivocation, that Christ existed from all eternity. And Christians say, "Oh yeah, it did say that. But we never took it seriously."

So to get to your notion of deep time, you're right on. [Deep time](#) is not just taking my moment as if it's the reference point, the be-all and end-all. Rather, I must look to how I fit in to past and future. How am I connected to this [universal history](#), this [geological history](#), this [history of civilization](#)? How do I situate myself inside of [all of that history](#)? This seems to me to be the real appreciation for Incarnation. Incarnation is planted inside of the very nature of the world that God created. God is revealing God's self in every creature. *Every* creature is a Word of God.

Host: Yes!

Richard: Now, my [spiritual] father [St. Francis](#) understood this notion in a very romantic way that the world has learned to love. When he called everything "brother" and "sister," he gave subjectivity to everything. He gave a certain kind of equality to everything, which no one had done in precisely that way, in that beautiful a way. Then we had an early mystic in the Order, St. Bonaventure. He was a philosopher who took the experience of Francis and made an entire philosophical system out of it, in which he made that very point: that every step of creation, every piece of creation is another Word of God. Each is another footprint, another fingerprint or revelation of the mystery. So the whole distinction between sacred and profane just doesn't work anymore. It's not even useful or helpful. It's not *true*. There's only one universe. It's all sacred, and it's all revealing the divine.

Host: Yes, amen, brother! Amen!

Richard: I think of how many of our people live in such a state of alienation, with low self-esteem, thinking they're unworthy because they've made it into a moral worthiness contest. When, in fact, it's merely a mystery you fall into, and you're already a part of. You don't *make* yourself a part of it. You're *already* a part of it! So the language is much more a language that

we *feel*—of surrendering, allowing, letting go—more than any kind of achieving. It’s the heart of the whole thing.

Host: Yes. I so appreciate what you’re saying. It resonates deeply with my own experience, that there was a dualism that collapsed when I realized that I was, in fact, (as [we all are](#)) [the universe itself, after some 13.7 billion years of unbroken evolution, now beginning to become conscious of itself](#). The human is an expression of this divinely creative process. To give God glory (to use religious language)—that is, to honor reality, to honor the whole—is that heartfelt response.

Given that, how can we be a blessing to the larger body of life of which we’re a part? And how can we contribute to it? And then in some ways it’s like an evidential mysticism or an empirical mysticism. I think [Bruce Sanguin](#) was the first one that offered that way of languaging it to me. He was the second of our speakers in this series.

I remember back, oh gosh, probably eight years ago now, I was speaking to a group of Catholic nuns at a retreat center in Indiana, and there was a very elderly nun, ninety or ninety-two, who came up to Connie, my wife, and she said, “You know, I’ve heard [Thomas Berry](#) and [Brian Swimme](#) before. But something happened in the course of this presentation here; I realized that the universe isn’t just *outside* of me. The universe is *inside* me, too.” And she was just lit up! This 90-year-old nun was *getting* it in a different way: a sort of scientific mysticism. She was having this mystical experience that there was no separation between her and nature, that she was part of this divine creative process. It was an amazing experience for Connie and me to talk with her.

Richard: You know, we’ve made it so much into a moral matter. When you don’t get to the mystical level, all you have left is low-level morality—at best. As a [Catholic](#), I’m not in any way trying to speak against the [Reformation](#). But I listen to the arguments of [Luther](#) and [Calvin](#), and they are still so preoccupied with sin, guilt, and shame—as if the only issue is moral unworthiness. There’s no mystical thing to delight in anymore. And it’s we Catholics who lost it. I’m not blaming them, but the fights of the Reformation are all on a rather low level. It’s like, “Who cares about that—you’ve both missed the point!” I’m trying to say they both missed the point, [Luther](#) and the [Pope](#), in arguing about theories of salvation.

Host: And back then, salvation was understood only in an otherworldly, unnatural, supernatural way. There was no sense that salvation also had a reality-based way [in this life, this world](#). Back then, salvation was merely about an *afterlife*, an *other* world.

Richard: ... and about the individual human person. It wasn’t the salvation of Creation, or of the New heaven and the New Earth.

Host: Yes, exactly!

Richard: There was no global or social notion to it at all. Even though we said in the creed that “We believe in the communion of saints,” it wasn’t a communitarian vision, by and large.

Host: Right! Exactly! And the communion of saints was usually interpreted in an in-group / out-group way. It was about we who practice the right *practices* and have the right *beliefs* are God’s in-group—and everybody else is an out-group.

Richard: It’s a shame; God must be very patient after these many billions of years and then our few hundreds of years of Christianity. I guess God is used to this.

Host: Right. Right. You know, Richard, one of the things that comes through in listening to you is this deep relational approach to life. You recognize that relationships are the heart of the cosmos. I’m wondering how you think about that from an evolutionary perspective? How do you imagine Christianity relating to other faiths? And [how do we as individual Christians relate to this world from a sacred, evolutionary understanding?](#)

Richard: Wow! That’s a good one. Let me go back to the very foundation. Some of my most popular conferences in recent years have been two that I did with other people on the Trinity. [Karl Rahner](#) had said that we could drop the doctrine of the Trinity tomorrow—although most Christians wouldn’t and shouldn’t consider it, of course—[yet, if we did] 98% of actual church belief and practice would remain virtually unchanged. Now, this tells me we haven’t built on a solid foundation. If the very shape of God does not reveal the shape of reality, then our Christianity is still pretty immature.

Do you see where I’m going? If God is Trinity, then God himself, herself, itself, is *relationship*. This is my foundation—that God is not a noun; *God is a verb*. God is an eternal circle dance. You know, from theology, the word they use, *perichoresis*: they took a word from Greek theater and applied it to the Trinity. If I did that today, they’d say I was New Age!

Host: Yes.

Richard: This is the idea of the [Cappadocian Fathers](#) in the 3rd and 4th centuries, that God is a circle dance. Once that becomes your template for the very shape of the divine, and therefore the very shape of creation, then there’s nothing that can be understood outside of relationship. So the later notion of the kind of growth of individualism that we have seen in the last three centuries just doesn’t fit. It doesn’t work; it’s just not true if our notion of God is true. I have to go back all the way to the foundation.

Host: I’m glad you did.

Richard: This is why *relationship* is so important to me. The I-Thou relationship that Martin Buber speaks of was revealed and mirrored for me in this very doctrine that we call God: God is *relationship*. So we had to create a new word, and we called it *ecology*. But the Medieval Franciscans called it “the Great Chain of Being.” We’re now looking for a dynamic vocabulary to describe what’s going on, and to recognize what we’ve now seen in the atom—or what we see in the galaxies—that it’s all relational. The old Newtonian world of simple cause-and-effect doesn’t explain things well at all. It’s *many* causes and *many* effects. Talk about mystery! It makes us much more humble. And the idea of the heroic individual saving himself, or becoming morally superior (or even morally inferior) by himself, just isn’t helpful anymore. It isn’t helpful to think of anything outside of a web of relationships. So, thank you for seeing that in my works.

Host: I’ve even come in recent years to thinking about spirituality. When you ask people what the word spirituality brings to mind for them or how they define it, it’s often defined as a set of practices—such as meditation, prayer, or contemplation. All that’s true, but I’ve come to think of those as *in service to something else*, which is that I see spirituality—certainly [evolutionary spirituality](#)—as the [practices, exercises, and resources](#) that help us be in [right relationship to reality](#), that help us live and support each other in living in right relationship to reality. The various traditional exercises and practices are essential to our traditions precisely because they are consistently effective in doing that. When one quiets one’s mind and attends to one’s heart, when one notices one’s thinking, when one stands in the face of what’s real, what’s undeniable, from a place of humility and a generous interpretation, one is naturally led and empowered to be in right relationship to reality. One is led in ways that we aren’t led if we’re simply relying on our own little “[Monkey Mind](#)” or our own narrow self-interest to move us forward.

Richard: Michael, what a good spirituality does is to dissolve interiorly the old philosophical problem of “the one and the many.” You find the truth within yourself at some level, on some experiential level of knowing. But then, you recognize that it isn’t just yours. It’s the participation in something that’s everywhere.

We’re speaking of theology today as *a turn toward participation*. Religion is not believing things or observing things or judging things; but religion is *participating* in something. Once you move to that level—and true spirituality always leads you there—it doesn’t really matter what the practice is. If it leads you to an experience of participation with the mystery, then you know it’s not just mystery. You become aware that it’s everywhere, and it’s all the time. It’s not just mine: I didn’t create it; I fell into it. Once you see the mystery at that level of depth and beauty, it’s very easy to recognize that others are participating in that too—and not just those who use your vocabulary or your cultural definitions of things.

I hope we’re getting there, because we’ve *got* to. There are billions of us on this planet. If we can’t start honoring the divine presence in *all* people, *all* religions, and *all* things, I don’t know what hope there is for the world. I don’t mean to be overly dramatic, but we don’t have

time for this in-house “my truth is the only truth” and “my truth is better than your truth.” We’ve created too many wars and hurt too many people by this kind of exclusionary thinking.

Host: This is exactly what I personally have found, and that a number of thought leaders in this series have expressed as well. It’s almost a revelation. There is a revealing of divine truth in this [Epic of Evolution](#)—what is sometimes called ‘[Big History](#)’ or ‘[The Great Story](#)’ or ‘[The New Story](#),’ as [Thomas Berry](#) sometimes refers to it. This 14-billion-year story, of physical evolution, biological evolution, and cultural evolution is *humanity’s common creation story*. We can all find that story, and it allows us to facilitate deep empathy, deep compassion with each other—while our traditional religious stories, by focusing on scriptural or traditional stories, typically don’t facilitate empathy. This is where I find a lot of inspiration from this Great Story, this Epic of Evolution.

Richard: When we talk this way, dualistic thinkers believe we’re talking ‘either-or.’ So they get scared; they think we’re rejecting our Christianity, or backing away from it. Actually, we’ve gone into the depths of it! And at the depths, you find the [Unified Field](#), as [Einstein](#) called it. I’m *more* a [Franciscan](#) and *more* a Christian than I was forty years ago. But what that means now is that I have an easy ability to honor and include just about everybody else.

Host: Yeah. Yeah.

Richard: And if that isn’t the goal of history, how can we call Jesus “the savior of the world,” as we do in the fourth chapter of John’s Gospel? Even the Vatican mission office has recently admitted that it’s very unlikely that Hindus and Buddhists are going to become Roman Catholics. They finally got the humility to recognize that maybe our job is to love them, as Jesus would have loved them, instead of trying to make them like us.

Host: Richard, what I’ve really been thrilled about in this series of conversations is that there are some things that we really do share in common. There are certain values and certain perspectives that we share. And one that seems to resonate with everybody I’ve talked with so far, I also want to sort of bounce off you. It is this notion that [how God, or how Reality](#), is communicating isn’t just through the tradition and through hierarchy. It isn’t just through ancient sacred texts. [God is communicating to us collectively through the whole range of evidence](#). That includes scientific evidence, cross-cultural evidence, historical evidence; these can legitimately be seen as divine revelation, divine communication. [God is guiding us \(to use religious language\) through this evidence](#). And I’ve been really pleased at how that understanding has resonated rather widely with our thought leaders. I’m wondering if you have any thoughts on [evidence as divine communication](#). The way I speak about it in my book is that [“facts are God’s native tongue.”](#)

Richard: The world of things is itself the primary evidence. *Romans* 1:20 says that. I was trying to get at the same thing when I said that the principle of Incarnation is that matter and spirit are one. We learn to honor it and recognize it and love it in the person of Jesus. Unfortunately, we made Jesus into an *exclusive* Son of God, instead of the *inclusive* Son of God. And so, we went right back into the sacred versus the profane. The world was still split.

I love to use that symbol of the veil between the temple and the outer world tearing at the death of Jesus—seeing it now as one world. Now, everything is *evidence*. I like that you used that word. It's *all* Incarnation.

Host: Yes.

Richard: So, why should we divide it—as if *this* is Incarnation and *that* isn't Incarnation? No! It is things in their bare existence that finally convert us, when we can surrender to them. When we can say, Why does that exist at all? Why is there something rather than nothing? Why this tree? Why this animal? Why this scientific knowledge? It *all* becomes revelation. So if that's the theme you're discovering in this series, I'm very honored to be a part of it.

Host: Thank you for the generous way you shared that.

One other theme that that seems to resonate with virtually everybody is what could be called a *global heart*. This is a commitment to the wellbeing of humanity as a whole. This concern, this compassion, includes not just our traditional in-group but extends to humanity as a whole and indeed to the larger body of life. I'm wondering if you have anything to share in terms of how you see [evolutionary spirituality's global heart](#).

Richard: Wow! Today is December 10th and it's the 42nd anniversary of [Thomas Merton's](#) death. He was one of my great teachers. He came to the monastery on December 10th of his 27th year, and he died on December 10th, twenty-seven years later. His life has so much symbolism to it. One of the things he said is that, "If it is the sacred dance, then it's always the general dance." Once you *get* it, it's *everywhere*—or that isn't it. If you're not in the general dance, you're not in the sacred dance. That's what all of us are coming to realize. If it's compassion, then it's *universal* compassion. It can't be just for my group, or my political party, or my baseball team, or my religion.

That's the very thing Jesus is critiquing in his own Jewish brothers and sisters. I ask, "Why was Jesus *inclusive* in his lifetime, and then afterwards we created an *exclusive* religion in his honor?" It doesn't make a bit of sense! He's consistently including Samaritans, Gentiles, prostitutes, drunkards, and tax collectors—which is an utter critique of his own Jewish religion at that time. Yet we Catholics repeated the same thing all over again in his name. I think it's just where consciousness was. Everything was tribal group-think, with ethnic belonging systems using God to maintain our belonging system. But you and I are blessed to live in a time of not

just general globalization, but spiritual globalization too. And there's nothing else that makes sense.

One final thing: You'd think if there were any group that would have come to this realization, it would have been monotheistic religion, which says there is *one* God who created *all* things. So we have Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all saying there's one God who created everything. Yet our history has been *against* unitive consciousness. It's been tribal; it's been sectarian; it's been ethnic—and it's resisted the very move that one God would have seemed to be moving us toward. But we can't resist it anymore. We are all children of one God. If it's one God and it's the same DNA, then everything is the same divine DNA. So it's just easier for us to see this—and it wasn't easy for many earlier people to see it.

Host: Richard, we need to begin winding down. I would really love to invite you to respond to two questions. One has to do with what's often thought of as fundamental feeling-states that human beings have always needed to thrive. These are states such as: *gratitude* when we look to the past rather than guilt or resentment, *trust* when we look to the future rather than fear, and *inspiration to be an action* in the moment—whatever the challenges or chaos of the day. Throughout most of human history, the way that cultures, individuals, and groups had consistent access to these feeling-states was through various beliefs—mythic beliefs. We now have *evidence*; we now have *knowledge* that can also get us there. It does so not at the expense of the religious traditions, but it is actually helping the religious traditions themselves to evolve—which I think is a hugely important thing. So, when *you* think of the big sweep of [Big History](#), the [Epic of Evolution](#)—of our entire evolutionary heritage, our relatedness and connectedness to that heritage—I'm curious about: What are the things that you're most grateful for? And what are the things that nourish your trust most deeply?

Richard: I probably was alluding to that earlier, in talking about what some call [the principle of uncertainty](#). Scientists are willing to live with this hypothesis, happily so. I think they have taught religion so much about faith, about [mysticism](#), about what philosophy calls epistemology. In religion we put all our emphasis on metaphysics, on having the right metaphysical answer. When I got my first degree in philosophy (not that I was ever that good at it), the whole first year was called [epistemology](#): How do you know what you think you know? We were taught all kinds of theories of knowledge. I was amazed how even [Thomas Aquinas](#), according to [John Duns Scotus](#), said there are two kinds of knowledge: rational and intuitive. How did we lose that? Now I see science rediscovering it. Like Einstein's intuition that whatever the Universal Field Theory was going to be, he said he intuited that it had to be simple, and it was going to be beautiful. Wow! This is what religion was saying, too!

So I'm grateful for the humility about knowing that science has given religion, even though I don't think we've learned the lesson yet. In fact, we've pushed religion into a corner because we don't want to learn the lesson. I find that many of my scientifically educated friends are much more dialogical, humble, and patient in conversation (for the most part) than we clergy.

That for me is a really huge gift, because until we change *how* we know and stop throwing around *what* we know with such great certitude, I don't think that conversation is going to move forward.

Host: Yes.

Richard: So this is what would come to me first.

Host: It seems to me that from a sacred evolutionary understanding, science is not just a secular enterprise, but is really helping us come to understand the nature of reality. It's also able to say a few things about what it is to be in right relationship to reality. That's what the ecological sciences are all about. They are helping us learn about how to be in right relationship with the reality of this planet, for example.

In a way, science is empirical theology, and scientists can be seen as empirical theologians. Even scientists who would deny God would be included in that category. In my experience, the God that [Richard Dawkins](#) says is "illusion" isn't illusion: that God never existed.

Richard: Yes—yes; so well put. We don't need to go around creating enemies all the time. If even 10% of what a person is saying is right, why can't I be grateful for that 10% and build on that, build bridges toward it instead of immediately blocking it off?

Host: An old mentor of mine told me something thirty years ago that has stayed with me over the decades. He called it, "the Meat and Bones Principle." He said, "Michael, if you expect any person to have it all right, to just be perfect in their thinking or their theology or anything else, you're out of touch with reality. We all have pieces of the puzzle. We all have facets of the jewel." He continued,

Consider any teaching and any teacher to be a combination of meat and bones. What you want to do is be nourished by the meat—but you don't want to choke on the bones. Some teachings and some teachers are like turkey or chicken: there's a lot of meat, and there's not a lot of bone—but you definitely don't want to choke on the bone. Other teachers or other teachings and other books are more like spareribs. The meat's really tasty, but there's a lot of bone there. You still want to be nourished by the meat—and don't choke on the bone. You throw the bones out.

I found that to be one of the most useful pieces of advice—in so many different contexts—over the years. It's allowed me to write and deliver a sermon in a number of places, including some of the most conservative parts of the country, thanking God for the New Atheists. Even those who are seemingly attacking religion are playing a role in this larger body of life! I believe they will be seen in the future as having played a positive role: they are helping us to evolve our own religious tradition.

And this really comes into the last question that I want to ask you: If everything in the universe is evolving, transforming, adapting, changing through time—including our social structures and institutions—and if everything will ultimately either evolve or become irrelevant or go extinct, How do you see the Christian tradition evolving? How do you see its evolution now? And then, if you might venture a guess: How do you see our Christian faith and our Christian tradition evolving in the next hundred years or the next 200 years?

Richard: I would hope, and I think on some level we will, stop seeing ourselves as a religion in competition with other religions. That merely affirms the ego in our groups and in us as individuals. I think it was [Simone Weil](#), the French mystic, who said, “If only Christianity had seen itself as a *gift* to all religions—as all religions are a gift to us—instead of in competition with the other world religions.” It seems to me we’re going to have to cross that line.

When [Mother Teresa](#) died, the Archbishop of Calcutta called me—I couldn’t believe I had the Archbishop of Calcutta on the line. He told me that she had died, and he was worried about the community. He knew my work with community, and he invited me to come over there for a few weeks and help him during this transitional period. In living inside the community, the sisters told me again and again that, “Mother told us to never try to make Muslims or Hindus into Catholics or Christians. Our job wasn’t to talk about Jesus to convince people of the Christian religion. Our job was to *be* Jesus and let the cards fall where they may.”

Just *being* Jesus is more than enough agenda for one lifetime! Just try as best you can to be Jesus in this context according to your gifts. If Christianity could just *be* Jesus, instead of making Jesus into a product or into an opponent—always one who builds boundaries instead of bridges—then, that would be my hope. That stance would certainly evolve consciousness, it would evolve religion, and it would evolve us as individuals. No longer can I build on my ego need to be superior or to be separate. Instead, I have to move with the soul—which sees the similarity, which sees the communality in all things. If Christianity evolved in that way, it would be a much more gracious world.

Host: Yes. Amen. Richard, thank you so much for sharing your experience, your perspectives, and your heart with our listeners today here on the leading edge of faith.

© Michael Dowd 2011. All rights reserved.