

Bruce Sanguin

“Evolutionary Christian Mysticism and Cosmological Midrash”

Episode 2 (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 2 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity](http://TheAdventofEvolutionaryChristianity.com):

Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith.” I’m [Michael Dowd](http://MichaelDowd.com), 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..

[Bruce Sanguin](http://BruceSanguin.com) is my guest today. [Bruce](http://BruceSanguin.com) has been a pastor at [Canadian Memorial United Church](http://CanadianMemorialUnitedChurch.com) in Vancouver, BC since 1996. He’s one of the leading voices in what’s called [Progressive Christianity](http://ProgressiveChristianity.com) or he likes to consider himself an evolutionary Christian mystic. His church is a model of evolutionary Christian spirituality. Bruce is the author of a number of books including [Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Ecological Christianity](http://DarwinDivinityandtheDanceoftheCosmos.com), and his most recent book of prayers, [If Darwin Prayed: Prayers for Evolutionary Mystics](http://IfDarwinPrayed.com).

We discuss the topic of “Evolutionary Christian Mysticism and Cosmological Midrash.” Bruce has been a dear friend for the last few years, and this is frankly one of the most inspiring conversations that I’ve ever had.

Host: So, Bruce, I appreciate you for taking the time to have this conversation. It’s really grown from how I originally envisioned this teleseminar. We now have about 28 Christian thought leaders. I see the purpose, first, to show that science-rejecting creationists and religion-rejecting atheists are actually in the minority. Rather, the millions in the middle, the majority in the middle, are represented by the widely diverse Christian thought leaders that are participating in this seminar, this teleseries—all of whom celebrate head and heart, reason and faith, science and religion. So I wonder if you could speak to how that occurs for you. How do you celebrate both an evolutionary understanding of reality and your Christian faith? A little of your testimonial: How did you come into this perspective that you now hold.

Bruce: It’s great to talk to you Michael; it always is. I love our conversations and how there typically is an emergent quality to them that both of us are surprised, sometimes, by what actually happens in the process of us having this conversation that we’re both so passionate about. So it’s great to be with you.

In terms of your question, I didn't really grow up with a science background. I took the usual high school science classes. I suppose unconsciously I was informed by a certain kind of presentation of a scientific worldview—and that formed some assumptions about the nature of reality for me. But then I became a Christian: I actually became a born-again Christian when I was about 20. And I did the whole thing of the Bible being the literal word of God. If the Bible said that God created the world in seven days, then God created the world in seven days, etc.

I inhabited that world for a couple of years, until it became untenable. I remember I ended up in seminary and I had this wonderful New Testament professor who looked at *me* (I felt) every time the class ended, and pointed to his temple and said “Think, think, think”—because he was dealing with a lot of us evangelicals or fundamentalists coming through [the system]. So it took me about a year and half, two years, to realize that I could no longer embrace that kind of literalist interpretation of scripture. The foundation collapsed for me.

The alternative to [literalism] in a liberal seminary was what we would call [liberal theology](#) (and nowadays we're calling a [progressive theology](#), a progressive worldview). On the one hand that was great, but on the other hand, something was missing for me. So over time, over a period of five to ten years, I lost a sense of conviction, a sense of passion for the faith—because part of this liberal postmodern perspective has to do with *everything* being about context and perspective, and there being no truth (what the [Integral](#) folks call “the myth of the framework”). Everything is the framework, but there's no substance. There's no truth within it. It's all just a constructed narrative. And I found that I actually got to a place (after I was ordained and serving my second congregation) when I just felt that I was wandering in a desert, and my faith had no juice. I was trying to preach Sunday after Sunday and just had lost the passion.

So I ended up going to a silent retreat in Narragansett, Rhode Island—a ten-day retreat—and had this mystical experience of being one with the cosmos, being an expression of the cosmos, a manifestation of the cosmos after 13.7 billion years. I experienced a kind of radical connectedness and a kinship with all that it is, including what I call Spirit or God. So I kind of staggered around the seashore for four days in this state. My mantra was “*I am the universe, noticing the universe. I am the universe, feeling the universe.*”

Host: How did that come to you?

Bruce: The reason it came to me—I don't know if I've ever shared this story with you—is that on the silent retreat I picked up [Brian Swimme's](#) slim volume: [The Universe Is a Green Dragon](#). You know, I read it in one sitting? And I *got* it!

It just was like, Oh...my...goodness! What cosmos have I been inhabiting? Where have I *been*? Who did I think I was? If I am not *this*, if I am not the presence of the universe in this human form, then who do I think I am?—this little bag of skin and bones?

What happened was that the dualistic worldview collapsed. [Before the collapse I felt that] there's Bruce over here, and the universe is out there—it's something I look at up in the sky. Or, there's the Earth, and then there's Bruce, and I'm walking on it. But the experience was that I

walking as the Earth: as the presence of the Earth in human form. And as I say, this was an experience of enlightenment for me; it was no less than enlightenment.

In important ways it was different than the classical Eastern form of enlightenment, which basically is kind of an *escape* from the Wheel of Life. This was more an *evolutionary* form of enlightenment, a kind of a Western form of enlightenment where I realized that I was the presence of the universe after 13.7 billion years—and we *all* were [that]. Therefore, my essential vocation is to ask myself the question, What is the *future* that needs *me* in order to emerge?

Host: Yeah, great, great.

Bruce: Right? So that kind of shifted everything for me. And, to come full circle, it gave me a reason to be in ministry again. I regained the passion and the conviction that's required to stand up Sunday after Sunday and do what I do.

Host: I'd like you to say a little bit more about that—because there's this dilemma in the postmodern church: the whole loss of conviction thing that you spoke to. Speak a little bit more, if you would, how through an evolutionary lens, a cosmological lens, that a kind of Integral empiricism returns, as does conviction.

Bruce: Well, I think that for what my colleagues and my friends are calling the [Progressive Church](#) (also [here](#)), faith is a dilemma. That is, if everything is simply context and perspective and arbitrary narratives that we construct with no underlying truth—you know, your truth is as good as my truth—then there's no way of valuing one truth over another. It's simply your construction and my construction, and hopefully we can meet in the middle. But a core is missing.

What is interesting to me is that [an evolutionary, a cosmological, worldview gave me back a sense of grounding my faith in the sense of truth](#)—not capital T truth, not that I have the truth and you don't, but there *is* truth. There is *empirical reality*. So we can begin to learn some of the actual cosmological dynamics of evolution and enter into an inquiry of, How do these inform our traditional doctrines, for example? How might they be in conversation and inform and enliven our doctrines of salvation, our doctrines of hope and promise, our doctrines of the cross and atonement? You can read those doctrines *back into* the story of evolution, or you can *start with* the story of evolution and then interpret those doctrines through those templates.

When I started to do that, my faith actually came alive again. I *experienced* the presence of, what I call, God or spirit as an animating power in this universe. So what *I'm* all about right now is what I call an [evolutionary Christian mysticism](#)—because of this experience of unity with all that is. I'm developing and working with, and learning about, a theology where spirit is *in* this unfolding—and this evolutionary unfolding is in spirit, as well. And that's tremendously exciting for me.

Host: I can hear it in your voice—plus, I’ve experienced it myself. The shift from seeing myself as separate from the universe, separate from Earth, to seeing myself as an *expression* of the universe, as a mode of being *of* Earth: that was an enormous shift for me, as well. [Brian Swimme](#)’s writings and videos, as well as [Thomas Berry](#)’s writings, played a huge role for me in that in the late ‘80s.

Bruce: Absolutely. It’s kind of an *empirical mysticism* in a way. It’s not an otherworldly mysticism. This conversation we’re having about unity with all that is, or unity within diversity, is actually grounded in empirical data. To spend time reflecting, as we are and in conversation around this, there’s a sense that you’re connecting with Reality—capital R—and being *animated* by Reality. I think what we’re looking for is a kind of 21st century *gnosis*, a deep sacred knowing about the nature of reality. That’s what keeps faith alive—not talking *about* stuff, right?

Host: Yes, exactly! I’ve come to see spirituality—or come to define [spirituality](#)—as the practices, the exercises, [the tools that lead me to be, and keep me, in right relationship to reality](#).

Bruce: Yeah, I love that.

Host: And part of what I find valuable—exciting—about the scientific endeavor is that it’s what I talk about in my book as [public revelation](#). It’s humanity’s collective intelligence about the nature of both *objective* reality and *subjective* reality. Interpreted in inspiring ways it can enrich and strengthen and deepen our faith—as it’s done for you. In fact, I wonder if you could say a little bit more about how this evolutionary, cosmological understanding of yourself as the-universe-become-conscious-of-itself, and also of [your connection to Reality / Source / One / God](#)—how has that shifted some of your own thinking around the Christian tradition?

Bruce: Just to give you one example, I was reading the other day about a French geophysicist—his name is [Xavier Le Pichon](#). Have you heard of this guy?

Host: I don’t think I have.

Bruce: He’s still alive. He was one of the first guys to discover tectonic plates. He was the first to actually take a submersible two miles down to the bottom of the sea and actually take a look at these fault-lines.

Host: Was this the mid ‘60s?

Bruce: Yes, mid '60s. He started to have these conversations with his fellow scientists. The interesting thing about Le Pichon was he was also a Catholic, a Christian. He had this experience where he was so deeply immersed in his research about fault-lines and tectonic shifts that he completely ignored the suffering on the planet. He didn't want to do that, so he left his research and went to work with [Mother Teresa](#) in Calcutta. He made a promise to dying babies in his arms that he would never again abandon them.

So he left his scientific endeavor and went to live with [Jean Vanier](#) in a [L'Arche community](#)—they lived with mentally challenged people—and Jean Vanier said, “That’s great; come and live with us. But go back to your science. We need you doing your science. It’s great science.” So, out of the integration of his experiences of suffering, compassion, and his work with tectonic plates, he developed a “[theology of fragility](#).” What he realized was that, while the shifting of the plates create tsunamis and earthquakes—which we regard as terrible—they are actually a source of life. [They bring forth] a tremendous vitality: all the water, all the nutrients come forth in a geological sense. So it’s a revitalization of Earth. But these [benefits] emerge from points of fragility—from the cracks on the Earth surface. In the same way, he said that suffering’s evolutionary purpose is to evoke in us—because he equated the suffering with the fragile places in the human realm: those who suffer experience a kind of fragility, these fault-lines. So when we’re exposed to this fragility in others, it evokes in us an empathic response.

So it was the first time that I started to look at the cross, the Christian symbol of suffering, and say, okay, there’s a cosmological purpose of the cross. We contemplate the suffering of Christ as an embodiment of all the suffering that has ever gone on cosmologically in the human species and the other-than-human species. And it evokes in us an empathic response, an evolutionary impulse to evolve along the empathic line of intelligence.

Host: Wow. I love that interpretation.

Bruce: Isn't that gorgeous?

Host: I've never heard of this before. This is great!

Bruce: And sometimes, Michael, I think that one of the missing pieces in evolutionary spirituality, as I have heard it articulated with my colleagues, is that it can tend to focus on sort of a *theology of glory*—as in, “Look at our potential! Look at what we are creating! Look at our tremendous capacity to shape the future!” All of this is absolutely true, and I think that’s brilliant and important. But [we need to] stop and think that there’s a *depth dimension* to [evolutionary spirituality](#) that’s found in the fragile places—and that you’ve got to go deep into the fault-lines. You’ve got to [take in the] suffering in order to allow your empathy to deepen. And that’s *also* an evolutionary impulse.

Host: You're triggering several currents of thought for me. One is that [Connie \[Barlow\]](#) and I have a real passion for communicating [what we now know scientifically about the nature of death in the universe](#)—from the death of stars to the death of mountains to the death of molecules and so on—and showing people how that's *creative*. When you really *get* that in your bones—realizing that death is natural and generative at all these different scales and levels of the universe—[it helps us think about our own death from a different place](#).

But also [Joanna Macy](#)'s work around helping people to really *feel* the suffering of the world—of other species, other humans. We often protect our hearts, so we don't feel the suffering; we keep it out. But if we open our hearts, our hearts break open with compassion. We feel the empathy, the compassion that lets us know how profoundly interconnected we are. And it's a softening and it's an empowering sort of thing!

Bruce: I love what Joanna does with that. She picks up on [Robert Lifton](#)'s work—I think he was the guy who came up with the term “psychic numbing.” We just numb down because the amount of suffering that's going on is overwhelming. But the paradox is, as you're saying, that if we will allow ourselves to actually contemplate the suffering, to go deeper into it, our hearts will open up and open out. We'll become the heart of the cosmos. We'll embody that love and compassionate impulse. We'll be shaped according to that kind of animating heart that beats at the center of the cosmos.

Host: What you're saying also reminds me of [two of the best books I've read in the last decade](#). One of them is [The Age of Empathy](#) by [Frans de Waal](#), who is one of the world's leading primatologists. I think the subtitle is *Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*. And the other one is [Jeremy Rifkin](#)'s new book, called [The Empathic Civilization](#)—which is a tome; it's a doorstopper. But it's one of the best books I've ever read. He talks about the trajectory that humans have taken: from feeling compassion and empathy for *your* kin, for *your* clan, *your* tribe, and then we keep finding ways of expanding our circles of compassion and empathy. The future of our planet, or at least the future of the human expression of this planet, largely resides in having compassion for people whom our grandparents hated or feared.

Bruce: Absolutely.

Host: There's this [trajectory of a widening “heart”](#), as we begin to recognize *who* we are and *where* we are and how profoundly interconnected and interrelated we are. So I love this theology of fragility, which is new stuff for me.

Bruce: Well, on your recommendation, I think in an email, I went and got Jeremy Rifkin's book and read it and had the same experience. It's a profound book—for just the reasons you described: this [trajectory of empathy](#). So how does one interpret that as a theologian? There

seems to be this empirical data that supports a trajectory towards increased capacity to care for, not just me, not just us—but all of us. And not just all of us, but *all that is*.

Host: Yes.

Bruce: And it seems to be that *that's* where it's going. As a theologian, you say, "Well, what's that about?" There seems to be some empirical basis for that. You don't *have* to interpret it this way, but one *could* interpret it as the Sacred Heart of the universe.

Host: I love that. I see that as, what I call, [night language](#)—a kind of poetry profoundly evocative of our feelings and of engaging our emotions.

Bruce: Yes.

Host: I've also heard you speak of "the theology of hope, of promise." Could you speak to that a little bit?

Bruce: Yeah, sure. It begins with an awareness that one of the core narratives in the Judeo-Christian scriptures is the narrative of promise. You can trace it in the story of Noah: the rainbow and the promise that God said, "I'll never again use violence to overcome violence." The rainbow is the promise of a different kind of future, a different covenant.

Abraham and Sarah are *promised* that they'll be progenitors of a great nation. Moses is called to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, according to a *promise*. The prophets—Isaiah, Amos, Joel—its all about a promise. Even with Jesus: it's the promise of a "*kingdom*," or a kingdom, that is already present but not fully realized. And then Paul's call to form a church—a movement of people to live into and out of God's promise for a better world, basically, essentially.

So this, again, can be interpreted literally. But I think there are problems when a fundamentalist orientation interprets, for example, that God promised us this particular piece of land—and, therefore, it's ours for all time. There are problems with that. But from an evolutionary perspective, what is this intuition that rises up again and again historically in those who call themselves "the people of God"? And I was thinking about how you could look at our solar system, for example, and see it metaphorically as the promise that was inherent in the earliest galaxies. In other words, you could imagine that there is an inherent yearning in those early galaxies for increased fullness and freedom of being. After billions of years you end up with a solar system with a potential for life. I watch herons soar across the inlet where I live, and you can imagine that in a reptile was the inherent promise of the heron that is now flying across and over the top of my house. Or a single-cell bacterium: we can think of ourselves as the promise that's inherent in a single-cell bacterium. It's metaphorically speaking—but still,

there's some empirical basis to say, "Well, this seems to be the case, in terms of this trajectory."

So then you ask yourself, "Well, what or who are we?" There's no reason to think of ourselves as the crowning achievement of the evolutionary process. But who knows how far in the future there may be this wonderful emergence of a new species that looks back at *us* and says, "I can't imagine how we emerged out of such a simple, yet beautiful, creature as *Homo sapiens sapiens*."

But we are now the *promise* of that future. And, when we try to imagine, "What's our *vocation*, then?" Well, our vocation is to be the presence of that promise—now, to the extent that we're able.

So, you can see in this doctrine of the *promise* of God—in the doctrine of *hope* in the Christian tradition—that there's a kind of empirical basis for it, as you trace this evolutionary trajectory.

Host: That's great. That's beautiful... One of the things that I'm hoping to do in these series of conversations is to explore how evolutionary Christianity is distinct, is different, from "[intelligent design](#)," on the one hand, or [secular humanism](#) on the other. I'm wondering if you have anything to say on that.

Bruce: Just this past Sunday, actually, I preached a sermon in which I tried to address this. The challenge is, in a sense: If God is conceived of as [a kind of supernatural bully](#) who intervenes every now and then (according to God's omnipotent will), and yet at other times he withholds his intervention, then It just doesn't satisfy the modernist sensibility of the dignity of the individual, right? It's like, Where's the freedom in that? If this supernatural God comes from some cosmic throne from the outside and decides at this point to intervene but somehow withholds God's self during a holocaust: Whoa! What kind of a God is *that!*? And what does that do to our own human dignity and freedom? So the question is, How does God act in an evolutionary theology? How does God influence reality in an evolutionary paradigm?

And here, I like the language of the [process theologians](#) and [philosophers](#). I think it was [Albert North] Whitehead who first started talking about God as the non-coercive, or the persuasive, presence of love that lures Creation at all levels of being (both animate and inanimate) towards the deepest possibilities of freedom and fullness-of-being that each of those levels is capable of. So, it's not a coercive presence.

I think the metaphor is a good one, because we can understand—if any of us are parents—that all we can do with our kids is to create a field of love, and we can hold them in that field of love. It's kind of an allurements towards "right relationship with reality," as you would call it. Then that's the best we can hope for. We don't know what any of our children are going to turn out like. We don't know the direction of their life; there's no template. We can't determine that. And if we *try* to determine it, it's going to be a disaster. Right?

Host: *[laughter]* I tried to raise my kids with peace-loving values. Well, my oldest daughter is a staff sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. In fact, she's one of the first women in U.S. history to be on the All Marine Wrestling Team.

Bruce: Wow, that's great, right? We need people like that, you know?

Host: Yes, absolutely! Oh, I'm so proud of her. In fact, she's due to give birth next week to [my first grandchild](#).

Bruce: Aww... that's so exciting.

Host: In terms of your point that basically all we can do is create a field, a context, of love and trust and respect. And then, just bless and see what [God, what Reality](#), does.

Bruce: Yeah. So, in terms of "intelligent design," which I think has been discredited: Every time they try to come up with some variation of the idea that there are some aspects of creation that are simply *too complex* to be explained in any way other than a supernatural intervention of a theistic God, over and over the examples have been discredited. My position is that [such discrediting] doesn't eliminate the presence of this field of love—the presence of this non-coercive field of love that is a source of allurements towards greater beauty and goodness and truth.

I know that there's lots of theological and philosophical debates we can have about [how God acts in the world]—whether or not mind can emerge out of matter: that is, can the more complex emerge out of the less complex, etc. My own feeling is that all of this evolutionary cosmos emerges from within a field of love. In other words, I'm imagining evolution as a divine strategy for making a world, but in a non-coercive way. And the future is indeterminate. There are no templates. There's no pre-set design to it. It literally is emerging out of our collective capacity for choice. Everything depends upon us awakening to our identity as *choosers* and not defaulters. As we live in to that kind of radical responsibility of being choosers, we become the presence of a sacred evolutionary impulse.

Host: Have you done much with evolutionary psychology or evolutionary brain science? How do you integrate an evolutionary understanding of [our evolved nature](#) (also [here](#), [here](#), & [here](#)) with your faith, with our Christian tradition?

Bruce: I haven't done so much with that, Michael. I read the stuff that you do. I read in the field, and I play with that a bit. But I don't really have any kind of expertise in that. But I love what you're doing. How would *you* say that it informs?

Host: Well, one of the things that it's done for me (and I've seen it in many other people, including a lot of young people) is that it provides a way of having gratitude for that which was previously either confusing or that you resented about yourself or others. I don't know of any Christian, Muslim, or Jew from a traditional perspective, a non-evolutionary understanding, that's genuinely grateful for their "sinful nature." The traditional stories typically are not interpreted in a way that facilitates gratitude for our evolved nature. [They don't facilitate gratitude for] the struggles that we have, the temptations that we have—all the sort of things that have been talked about in terms of "your better angels", "your inner demons", or concepts like ego and superego. These are all sort of mythic constructs that have helped us try to understand what's going on inside of us.

So for me, I've had [a far richer understanding of the wisdom of ancient mythic insights—such as the fall of Adam and Eve, or "original sin"](#)—because I interpret it as my evolved instincts that are out of sync with the world that I have to live in and the fact that we're surrounded by, what [Deirdre Barrett](#) calls, "[supernormal stimuli](#)." That is, we're surrounded by concentrated substances and concentrated forms of food that we didn't evolve to deal with and that we're programmed evolutionarily to be addicted to or to crave.

Bruce: Yeah, and that's where you talk about "[mismatched instincts](#)" too, which I think is brilliant.

Host: So for me, it's by noticing what's going on inside of me through an evolutionary lens that I have gratitude. It's kind of like that old adage, "What you resist persists." But what you can be *grateful* for can actually transform. I don't struggle with my sinful nature in the way that I did before—not even close. There's an effortlessness to being in integrity, to being in *deep* integrity (what I sometimes call, [Big Integrity](#)).

Bruce: There's a compassion that arises, right? Towards oneself—and you, kind of, get over a judgmentalism. You just come to a deep appreciation that physiologically we deal with these mismatched instincts.

Host: And that we wouldn't be alive today—none of us would be alive today—if our ancestors didn't have these very same instincts, these very same impulses, that we sometimes find problematic and challenging living in a modern world.

Bruce: And as you point out, that doesn't mean that we don't have responsibility.

Host: Absolutely.

Bruce: We absolutely *do* have responsibility. But it gives us a greater awareness of what exactly we're *dealing with*—in terms of the complexity of our choices and dealing with our impulses and instincts.

Host: I could imagine a sociopath or a psychopath taking this [understanding] in a direction of complete self-centeredness. But in my experience, virtually everybody—in fact, I can say confidently, *everybody* that I've talked to about this—nobody has used it as an excuse for immoral or addictive or dysfunctional behaviour. It actually makes it *easier* to be in integrity when you have compassion for yourself and when you have an understanding—and when you have gratitude. You then understand what's going on. Also, you also realize that integrity is not a solo sport. It's a team sport. We need each other.

Bruce: Yeah, nice.

Host: So it loses the stigma. There's not something fundamentally *wrong* with me. And the reason that I'm tempted in these certain ways isn't because my great-great-great-great-great grandmother ate an apple. That story is symbolic; it's pointing to something.

Host: I want to come back to one of the themes that I see for this conversational series — which is to compellingly show how humanity's best collective intelligence (our most current scientific understandings of the big picture, [Big History](#): of [cosmic, Earth, biological and human evolution](#)) that it not only doesn't have to *threaten* religious faith, but it can positively *expand* it and deepen it. What would you say to a young person struggling with how to think about science and religion?

Bruce: The first thing I'd say is, “Look at the gaps in your sense of [deep time](#).” One of the things that happened to me since I had this kind of enlightenment experience is I started getting interested in science again, because there were huge gaps [in my understanding].

Then I would say that the physical and empirical dimensions of reality that are discovered through science can actually, as we've discovered in our conversation, form templates that don't necessarily undermine theology or spirituality. In fact, in my experience, [scientific understanding] can really inform and fill them out: ground them in reality, which has been exciting for me.

So week after week, I'm basically doing cosmological midrash in my sermons. I'm taking these scriptural texts, week after week after week, and looking at them through a cosmological, evolutionary lens. I'm not making the claim that those [cosmological] meanings are intrinsic to the text. I'm not saying that the writers had any notion of science or what evolution was. But I *am* saying that it's legitimate to do so, for example, Look at a “theology of promise” through a cosmological lens. Look at a “theology of hope.” Look at a “theology of sacrifice.”

The challenge, Michael, is that there aren't many churches that are doing this explicitly. At Canadian Memorial, we've made our core purpose to teach and practice [evolutionary Christian spirituality](#). We're dreaming of [establishing] an academy of evolutionary Christian mysticism, while trying to help our people get a grasp of deep time: to learn this new cosmology, to develop an evolutionary spirituality. My hope is that people will have a *felt experience* of this kind of unitive experience that we've talked about: as [ourselves] being the presence of the universe in human form. I think that that's what shifts everything. You gain the psychic and the emotional and the spiritual energy to do this work of repairing the earth and living in alignment with what you call "[Reality](#)".

Host: My own shift was very similar. I was pastoring a small Congregational church, a Federated church: it was connected to both the [American Baptist](#) denomination and the [United Church of Christ](#). It was the only church in a town of fifteen hundred people, in Granville, Massachusetts. I drove two hours to Boston for a six-week course, every Monday night, for three hours at the Spirituality Center. It was taught by [Albert LaChance](#), who had studied one-on-one with [Thomas Berry](#) for five years. Albert is an amazing poet, cultural therapist, and addictions counselor. I remember, about a half-hour into his program, he was talking about that "we are the universe becoming aware of itself." And I so *got* it! I literally had goose bumps up and down my arms and legs. I started to cry and I realized, I'm going to spend the rest of my life popularizing this perspective. It was like my appointment with destiny. It was February 1st, 1988. I remember it so clearly.

Bruce: Wow. I had the exact same spirit experience in Narragansett, where I thought, "I'm going to spend the rest of my life coming to terms with what's happening to me." And you've *done* it. I mean, I'm doing it *my way*, but you being on the road and making this your life is very inspiring.

Host: Well, I feel like the richest man in the world that I get to do this and share this message with so many different kinds of audiences and numbers of audiences. But I get to do it with somebody who is such an incredible thinker and writer and contributor and teacher: Connie [Barlow]—and who also wants to live this radical lifestyle. I really doubt that there are a whole lot of women in the world that would want to live their lives travelling—permanently. To have all that: it's just extraordinary! Absolutely extraordinary!

Bruce: Yeah, it sure is. I'm grateful for what you two are doing.

Host: Well, I'm grateful for the collegiality: that you are one of my closest brothers in this larger movement.

The last thing that I want to ask you about in this conversation is this: One of the hopes I have for [this series of conversations](#) is that, in spite of whatever our differences (theologically, metaphysically), I'm hoping that a core commons emerges—something that we can say that,

“Yes, we’re different. We’re all over the map on all kinds of things. But we’re all identified with the Christian tradition and we celebrate a science-based evolutionary understanding. And we *can* speak with one voice on some really important matters. We share common values.”

I have my own sense of how to language that. (I’ll get a reality check in these conversations.) But I think that *we all share deep-time eyes, a global heart, and a valuing of evidence as divine communication*. But that language may not work for others.

Bruce: I love that. That resonates deeply with me. I don’t know how wide a constituency you’re in here in conversation around this series, Michael—but that sure speaks to me. I think that would provide common ground for that big conversation. I think that’s what needs to happen. We need to be linking in with each other. There’s no reason that we can’t do that.

Host: Yeah. Well, in this teleseries, we’ve got 28 of us at last count. [*Editor’s note: Ten more speakers were later added to the series.*] We run the entire gamut from liberal to conservative to Emerging Church, Catholic, Protestant, Process theology. It’s just an amazing diversity of Christians who have a deep grounding in their Christian tradition, and who fully celebrate a deep-time evolutionary understanding. And I think that “deep-time eyes, a global heart, and a valuing of evidence as divine communication” might be our common ground. At least that’s my first offering—and I’m inviting the community to improve on that, alter it, edit it, or change it.

But I think one of the reasons why the [New Atheists](#), on the one hand, and the [Young Earth creationists](#), on the other, are the ones that get the lion share of the media attention is because they pretty much speak with one voice. And yet, I think the evidence shows that they’re actually in the minority. Those of us who find a way of holding both are actually in the majority, and yet we don’t speak with one voice—or we haven’t yet. And so that’s one of the things I’m hoping to get out of this series: What is it that we can confidently claim to speak with one voice about?

Bruce: Beautiful! That’s great.

Host: Well, Bruce, everybody listening to this, of course, is not going to be familiar with your work. I’m wondering if you could take a few minutes and talk about your previous books and then your new book. Talk about your creative contributions in recent years.

Bruce: Sure. I’ve written a few books and now this fourth one is coming out. The previous one was called [The Emerging Church](#)—based on the scientific sense of emergence (not so much what is called the Emerging Church movement). I explore what are the programs, processes, and principles that would be aligned with an evolutionary spirituality, which is what we’re trying to do at Canadian Memorial, the church I serve. So that book is practical; the subtitle is [A Model for Change and a Map for Renewal](#). It’s for people who are interested in some of the

processes that we've gone through at my church and some of the programs we're running on this theme.

Earlier I wrote a book called [Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Ecological Christianity](#). There, I'm essentially saying that what's required in this great work of repairing our planet is a *shift in identity*—exactly as we've been talking about. If we begin that work from a place of *being* the presence of the Earth in human form, then we'll enjoy the deep kinship, the profound sense of interconnectedness. Our work is not so much that of being good little caretakers of the Earth (which is the predominant metaphor of stewardship in the liberal church), but it's just to *take our place in grace*—to assume our *identity* as kin with all Creation and live accordingly. So that book is a reflection on that.

Host: I love the way that you said that. The language I've been using is that we as a species are going through a rite of passage. We're maturing and we're shifting. As children, we go from thinking that the world is centered around us, and we realize as an adult that our legacy (how we'll be remembered by history) will be determined by our contribution to the world. So the way I started languaging it is that for our species, collectively, we're now going from thinking that the world was made for us, to realizing that we were made for the world.

Bruce: Nice.

Host: We are here to be like an immune system, where our role is to protect and foster and defend the health and the wellbeing of the larger body of life, of which we're a part, and that humans will thrive in that kind of world. And I believe that mythic language—traditional religious language—like, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven,” or the Second Coming of Christ, is pointing to *this* sort of thing. But I love the way you just languaged that.

Bruce: Well, and in that book I do a midrash on the [Parable of the Prodigal Son](#), which I call the [Parable of the Prodigal Species](#). It was necessary in the modernist period for us to differentiate from the Earth. But that differentiation descended into *dissociation* in the modern period, where we became dissociated from the Earth. So the Parable of the Prodigal Species tells the story of that modernist journey of differentiation, of leaving home and demanding the inheritance of 13.7 billion years. And then basically in the course of about 300 years squandering that inheritance. Then, like the Prodigal Son, we awaken as a species. In the [biblical] parable it says that the prodigal son “came to his senses.” I think that's the moment that we find ourselves in: We are coming to our senses as a species, having to reorient. And then we return home with a fundamentally altered identity. The prodigal son, in the Bible story, doesn't come home as an entitled or privileged son, but rather in humility. He asks to return simply as a servant.

So there's a profound transformation. In the evolution of our species we've come through this modernist period where we dissociated from the Earth, and now we're in a period where we're going to reunite and (hopefully) come through adolescence or some other kind of stage.

And then my most recent book: I'm really excited about it. It's a collection of prayers that I've written from an evolutionary perspective. It's called, [*If Darwin Prayed: Prayers for Evolutionary Mystics*](#). These are prayers that I actually wrote for Sunday morning rituals, where I wanted to bring this cosmological worldview into the prayers. My sense is that until this worldview gets liturgical legs and the language of our hymns starts to shift, it will not gain the traction that it needs.

Host: Right, I agree.

Bruce: So, I've tried to write some prayers from this perspective and I'm really excited about it.

Host: That's great. I know [Michael Morwood](#) has done some work on that, too. I think that's some of the most important work that has to happen: grounding religious education in this [epic of evolution](#) and grounding liturgy—our prayers, our responsive readings, rewriting hymns and using more contemporary music, as well. Music, the arts, poetry: that's what engages the soul, the emotions, our imaginations.

So is that book out yet?

Bruce: Yeah. The first shipment of books is en route as we speak. It will be available on [ifdarwinprayed.com](#), my new blog website. It will be available [through Amazon](#), as well.

Host: So, Bruce, in bringing this wonderful conversation to a close, I'm wondering if you might be willing to read one or two of your poems, your prayers.

Bruce: Sure. I'll read from the prologue of the book, a poem called "If Darwin Prayed."

Host: Great.

Bruce: So this is it:

I wonder,
if Mr. Darwin had imagined
a God bigger
than the theist's puppeteer —
and less aloof
from nature's ways —

how he might have prayed.

I wonder,
if he had viewed the great march of time
with a mystic's eye —
as Spirit's unhurried play with form and function,
not creation leaving God in the dust
and pulling itself up by its own bootstraps —
if his heart might not have burned with faith.

I wonder,
when the push of Eros
and the pull of the possible
caused him to close the City of God
and leave the dreary seminary
to set sail on board his *Beagle* destiny,
if he ever imagined that he embodied Spirit's
irrepressible urge to evolve.

I wonder,
when he reflected on the mystery of a finch's beak
and the glories of the Galapagos,
if Mr. Darwin considered his own adaptive brilliance
that brought forth *The Origin of Species*
(his great gift to theology)
an occasion of an even deeper Mystery —
evolution awakening in him.

I wonder,
If, hunched long years
over beetles and mollusks,
he ever considered —
St. Paul's self-emptying God,
touching all with a rising,
noncoercive Presence,
and then going on ahead of us —
as did the Galilean —
calling from an undissected future,
beckoning this sighing creation

toward freedom and fullness of being.

I wonder, Mr. Darwin,
if your beloved Emma might have worried less
over your apostasy
if you could have played the prophet
and announced, with the Baptist,
that evolution was filling every valley
and making low the mountains,
preparing a highway
through Descartes' desert,
for the advent,
and not the end,
of God.

(If I were God,
I too would keep my presence hidden,
an allurement of love that predestines no fixed future,
conferring maximum dignity upon life,
as together all that is
joins in the great procession
of the formless, assuming form most glorious,
crowning the human ones
with a distinctive diadem —
the capacity to select our own future,
naturally).

I wonder
if Darwin prayed.

Host: That's great! That poem was actually one, when you sent me the galley and I read it aloud to Connie, we both teared up. And then I read several others—and her comment was about being a religious naturalist, an atheist, and *loving* your prayers. That's really quite a high compliment.

Could you read one more?

Bruce: All right. Why don't we do one I call "The Bigger Bang of Christmas"?

Host: Okay. That's perfect for this Advent series.

Bruce:

Creator God,
from your fecund womb,
a birth-explosion of light and matter
erupted.
You declared it,
proud Mother,
to be good.

Time, evolution's handmaid, passed.
And from the depths of Earth
you bodied-forth Jesus,
Spirit-filled and fired with holy vision —
some say a second creation.
A bigger bang flared forth in him,
Spirit's expansion in all directions.

Love burned in him so that our small
and isolated selves might undergo a heat death,
birthing a supernova soul
and all the elements necessary for a new creation:
spiritual knowing,
compassion,
service,
and an unambiguous consent to be future shapers.

Our souls now see,
Universe Maker,
in this Christmas miracle,
the goodness of both creation stories.
Amen.

Host: Amen!

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