

# Biblical Christianity and The Great Story

## A conversation between Michael Dowd and a Christian college student

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www.TheGreatStory.org

**Student: Why do you call the universe story “The Great Story”? I’ve always heard that the Bible was the greatest story ever told.**

**Michael:** For millions of people around the world it is true: the Bible *is* the greatest story ever told. But I’m using the phrase in a different way. Let me explain.

The reason I call the history of everyone and everything “great” is not because this story is necessarily the best or most powerful or most life changing. For some it is; for others it’s not. I refer to the 13 billion year epic of divine creativity as “The Great Story” because it is simply the biggest story, the most encompassing. It is the story that embraces and includes all the others. There is no way of speaking about Reality and our relationship to it — no secular or sacred story from any culture — that is left out or not valued in this Great Story. Moreover, The Great Story also includes each of our personal stories — our joys and struggles, our accomplishments and contributions — what we’re proud of as well as what we’re ashamed of. All of it.

But in the sense that you mean, I think, it’s really a personal thing. Every person gets to say what this story means to them, if anything at all. You may feel that what I call “The Great Story” is fascinating; it shows promise perhaps, but it’s not great. No problem! Call it “The Fairly Decent Story” if you like.

The reason I experience the epic of evolution as “Great” with a capital “G” is that it touches my heart, captures my mind, and draws me into a state of reverence like no other story on the planet. It enriches my faith and is enriched *by* my faith. As the history of God’s love and creativity, this story inspires and empowers me every time I hear it. I get goosebumps often just thinking about it!

What I’m calling “The Great Story” includes the whole Bible, of course. No biblical story is left out. Yet it also includes stories the biblical writers, inspired though they were, couldn’t possibly have known: the story of the Chinese people, for example, or the story of the galaxies and our solar system, or of human history since the time that the Bible was written, or of your story, and mine.

**Student: So you’re not saying that the universe story is superior to the biblical story?**

**Michael:** Absolutely not! Is a tree superior to its roots, or a human body superior to its liver? Of course not! Without roots there is no tree. But roots don’t make up

the whole tree either. The liver may only be a part the body; but without it the body will die. So one is not superior to the other. They operate at different levels of complexity.

The Great Story embraces, includes, and heralds the Christian story, but it also transcends it because it includes, too, many stories the biblical writers didn't know about: such as the story of the dinosaurs, or the story of how God created the atoms of your body, your clothes, and everything around you in the furnace of a supernova star which preceded the birth of our Sun. The Great Story says a resounding "Yes!" to biblical revelation but holds it in a much larger context than ever before. It says that the stories of the Bible are not merely literally true (some are, some aren't; that's for scholars to debate), but far more importantly; the biblical stories are cosmologically true. They are *symbols* that point to profound truths about the real world and the real human condition. Each biblical story is a metaphor for something real (though often invisible) and something important about the cosmos. But this insight is missed if these stories are interpreted only, or primarily, in a literal way. Many people (conservatives and liberals alike) are discovering for themselves the joy and freedom of interpreting the Bible as universally true in *this* sense. When biblical revelation is understood as revealing important truths (albeit symbolically or metaphorically) about the nature of Reality and our relationship to it, people invariably have a renewed respect and awe for scripture. It edifies their reading of the Bible; it doesn't diminish it.

**Student: How did you come to this perspective? What's your spiritual journey in a nutshell?**

**Michael:** I was raised Roman Catholic (I'm the oldest of four kids) and went to Catholic school through 7th grade. My parents divorced when I was twelve, and at the age of fourteen I went with a friend to a Baptist youth camp, which had a significant impact on my thinking. Five years later, while I was in the U.S. Army, stationed in Berlin, Germany, I had a powerful mystical experience on a mountaintop. I felt as if God had given me the eyes to see over vast stretches of geological time. And I heard that still, small voice of my heart say that I was destined to make a real and lasting difference in the world. The next Sunday I went to an Assemblies of God church for a special showing of a film produced by The Billy Graham Association. The film just reached in and grabbed my heart and quickened my soul. When it was over and the preacher asked if there was anyone who wanted to come forward to be prayed for, I nearly ran down to the altar. I asked Jesus that day to forgive my sins, to take up residence in my heart, and to become my personal Lord and Savior. I also committed myself to walking in his steps from that day forward. When I finished praying I felt lighter and happier than I had ever felt in my life. No one needed to tell me what had happened. I knew I had been born again because that's exactly how I felt.

For the next several years I was nurtured and disciplined in an evangelical-pentecostal context. Six months after asking Jesus into my heart, I had an experience that some refer to as "the baptism of the Holy Spirit" while at a spiritual

retreat center in the German Alps. I began speaking in tongues at that time and have maintained this ecstatic, meditative spiritual practice ever since.

These two experiences transformed my life. Although I had a solid religious upbringing, my later teenage years were marked by a personal struggle with drugs and alcohol. Once free of the enormous burden of these vices, my love of learning and passion for life resurfaced with a vengeance. I devoured anything I could get my hands on that offered a biblical perspective on life or insight into how I could experience a closer walk with God. I listened to Keith Green and other prophetic contemporary Christian musicians. I read Charles Finney, A.W. Tozer, Andrew Murray, Charles Fillmore, Ron Sider, and a host of other spiritual writers from different traditions. I read the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, twice, in less than six months. The second time through took me only six weeks.

While still in the Army, in the spring of 1981, I went on a pilgrimage to Israel and Ireland, spending a week in both places. It was during that trip that I experienced God's call to full-time ministry. I didn't know exactly what form or forms this would take but I knew I would be spending my life sharing the Great News of God's love. After getting out of the Army, before starting my first year at Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri, a liberal arts school affiliated with the Assemblies of God, I hitchhiked all around the country (literally!) — from Miami to New York to Seattle to San Diego to Springfield.

Is this more detail than you want?

**Student: No, not at all. Please continue. This is exactly what I was hoping you'd get in to.**

**Michael:** Well...I'll just give you a few of the major turning points, the stuff that's relevant to our discussion. I don't want to take too much time on this.

The first day at Evangel was rather traumatic for me. I guess I just assumed, this being a Christian college, that all my textbooks would be written by born-again Christians. So when my biology professor held up a zoology textbook we were going to use, I gasped. I couldn't believe my eyes. Having encountered that same book four years earlier at the University of Miami, I knew that it taught evolution. Certain that the theory of evolution was of the devil, I thought to myself, "Satan obviously has a foothold in this school." I picked up my books, walked out of the room, and immediately withdrew from the course.

God's got a wonderful sense of humor, wouldn't you agree? I mean here I am now traveling the continent teaching and preaching a sacred way of seeing evolution! Being humbled is a good thing, right? I sure hope so, because God seems to enjoy humbling me! At least I know how Saul felt on the road to Damascus.

Over the months that followed, thanks to the patience and commitment of my professors and fellow students at Evangel, I eventually came to embrace evolution

as the means, expression, and result of God's creativity over 13 billion years. This is still how I understand evolution today.

After graduating from Evangel with a double major in biblical studies and philosophy, I attended Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Philadelphia, for three years. That's where I came to accept that, while the Bible was divinely inspired, it was also a book written by real human beings with real gifts and limitations, each with his or her own personal beliefs, judgments, opinions, and assessments about the world — some accurate, some not — just like the rest of us. Recognizing this, I realized that it was unfair of me to expect the scriptures to reflect anything other than the best understanding of the universe that was possible when they were written.

I pastored three congregations from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s: an American Baptist/Congregational church in western Massachusetts, a United Church of Christ church in southeast Ohio, and another UCC congregation in Ann Arbor, Michigan. My parishioners taught me far more about ministry than I ever learned in seminary, and far more about life than I was ever able to teach them, I'm quite certain. Like I said, God seems to enjoy humbling me.

In 1988 I was introduced to the work of cultural historian and Passionist priest Thomas Berry. This marked another turning point in my life. The first night I heard Albert LaChance, a prophetic poet who had studied one-on-one with Father Berry for five years, tell the scientific story of the universe as a sacred story, I heard my heart say: "Michael, my boy, you're going to spend the rest of your life popularizing this story. Have fun sharing the great news!" Remembering my mountaintop experience in Germany, and my time in Israel and Ireland, a wave of joy and gratitude, and sense of destiny, washed over me that night, and that sense has never left.

Virtually everything I've said and done since that evening — every sermon I've preached, everything I've written (including my book *EarthSpirit*), and everything on my website — has been designed to fulfill on this mandate from God: to popularize The Great Story in such a way that others experience it for themselves as Great News and are inspired to serve God according to their gifts.

Does that answer your question?

**Student: Yes. Thank you.**

**Michael:** Thank you!

**Student: Your website mentions that you also did work in the field of community organizing and sustainability. When was that?**

**Michael:** In 1996, I was hired as Religious Organizer for the Washington, DC-based National Environmental Trust. I organized Jewish, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical religious leaders across the country on key environmental issues that

were coming up for a vote in Congress. This was challenging but very rewarding work, though I don't think I was nearly as effective as I could have been. My first wife, Alison, had recently divorced me and this was a particularly difficult time in my life — a "dark night of the soul" you might say. In 1997, I was hired by Global Action Plan, a non-profit environmental and community empowerment organization based in Woodstock, NY, to head up government-sponsored Sustainable Lifestyle Campaigns in Portland, Oregon and Rockland County, NY. I did this for nearly five years.

Working at the leading edge of the sustainability movement was deeply satisfying. I managed two state-of-the-art programs: the EcoTeam Program and the Livable Neighborhood Program. Municipally funded, both programs help neighbors get to know each other better, conserve resources, and improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods. It was soul-satisfying work to be sure. Then I met Connie Barlow in 2000 and we married in 2001. Once we realized that we held the same vision — to teach and preach the marriage of science and religion for personal and planetary wellbeing across North America — and both of us felt called by God to begin right away, we launched our traveling ministry. We actually expect to be doing this for the rest of our lives. For us, there is absolutely no sacrifice involved. We can't imagine a more fulfilling way to live.

**Student: You said earlier that The Great Story "enriches your faith". I'm assuming you mean that it enhances your walk with Christ or deepens your appreciation of Christian doctrine, or something like that, is that right?**

**Michael:** Yes, exactly. And The Great Story also makes God's presence more real to me — *much* more real!

**Student: How does it do that? Can you give an example?**

**Michael:** Sure. I'd be glad to.

First of all, we need to remember that when the Bible was written, people believed that the world was flat, stationary, and at most only a few thousand years old. Stars were seen as the pinprick holes in the canopy, or dome, of the heavens that allowed God's glory to shine through. The very real yet mostly intangible energies, forces, and dynamics within nature, within society, and within each of us — realities that we all experience every day and which modern science usually describes mechanistically — were described in biblical times using language of angels, demons, spirits, and other personifications. And quite naturally, Christian theology, doctrine, and creeds based on the Bible reflect this pre-scientific worldview. There's nothing wrong with that. It couldn't have been otherwise. It's a blessing, not a problem.

The challenge — or really the opportunity — is that we now live in a very different world, and our culture today uses very different metaphors and analogies for understanding and relating to Reality. So if we *only* use biblical language and metaphors, we are going to miss in a huge way what God is up to in our world and

in our lives. Why? Because we're going to keep expecting God to show up like what we read about in the Bible, and, consequently, we're not going to notice God's presence and activity in *our* lives every moment of every day. As St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest Christian theologians of all time, said in the thirteenth century "Any error about creation leads to an error about God." If this was true 750 years ago, how much more is it true today?

The other reason why it's important to use up-to-date metaphors and scientifically credible language when speaking about biblical truths is that if we continue to interpret our theology and doctrine in light of a first century worldview, we will grossly underestimate the this-world reality of important Christian concepts. Take the New Testament witness regarding "the second coming of Christ," for example. If we expect the physical and spiritual reality of this prophetic insight to show up in first century cosmological dress, we will be looking to the skies for a 6 foot tall, 170 pound man with long, dark hair, white robe, and sandals to literally descend on the clouds. If that's where we're focusing our attention, however, and if that's what we think Love Incarnate's "second coming" is going to look like, then we'll completely miss how this might be occurring right before our eyes — but in a very different form than we might expect.

I'm not trying to criticize those who interpret the Bible or the second coming in this kind of an otherworldly way. That's exactly how I thought of it for a number of years. But now, in light of The Great Story — the epic of evolution told as the history of God's creativity and self-revelation — I believe we will miss the real power and significance of the biblical message for *our* time if we continue to view it through 2,000 year old lenses — that is, if we continue to interpret the Bible as anything less than pointing in a sacramental way to the nature of the real universe in which we live and move and have our being, and our destiny within it.

Here's another example of what I'm talking about: To interpret the story of the birth, life, teachings, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus as merely having to do with saving a select group of people (born-again Christians) from the fiery torment of a literal hell beneath the Earth when they die is to trivialize the gospel. Given the actual bad news that human beings experience around the globe today, added to the inescapable disappointments in our personal lives and sometimes deep emotional distress that is simply part of the human condition — part of life after "the Fall" — such an understanding would hardly be felt as "good news" by billions of people. A far richer interpretation of this story, it seems to me, is available when we begin to look at it cosmologically.

**Student: You lost me there. Please explain what you mean by looking at the story cosmologically.**

**Michael:** Well, for one thing, it tells me that when I feel like I'm in hell, I am! And if I want to be free of the torment that I've created for myself — the literal hell of my own judgments, or from being out of touch with Reality as a result of my thinking, I need look no further than love, real embodied love. Great Heart is our



salvation. And yes, this fact is *universally* true — that is, it's true for all peoples everywhere.

From this story I learn that the only way I can be fully restored to the original blessing of immediate intimacy with my Source and my Life — an intimacy that our ancestors palpably experienced on Earth for millions of years — the only way I can regain this intimacy with God is to live with the "law of Love" in my heart: that is, loving Ultimate Reality with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving my neighbor (including my enemy) as my self. From the story of Jesus as it is presented in the gospels I learn that Reality itself is always ready to forgive me if I will simply turn around (repent), surrender to the wisdom of Infinite Grace (within and around me), and boldly yet humbly follow my heart.

From the gospels I also learn that suffering and death are not outside the redemptive will of God — that on the other side of even the worst experiences that may come our way are resurrection power, freedom, and new creative possibilities.

These are but a few of the interpretive insights that become available when one opens to the *cosmological* wisdom of the gospels — when one begins to ponder, "What does this story tell me symbolically about the nature of the universe, my relationship to it, and my role in its destiny?"

**Student: I like that example. It rings true. And I think it could be helpful — if I can just remember it! Could you give me more — more ways of finding, what you call, "cosmological truth" in the gospels?**

**Michael:** Happily!

Here's how I understand heaven and hell cosmologically. Now this isn't "the truth", mind you, it's simply a helpful way for me to understand the reality of these truths in *my* world. What happens when I die is in God's hands. But on *this* side of death, I see heaven as the experience of being consciously aware of my true nature and being guided by my heart, by love, by the risen Christ. I experience heaven to the degree that I trust the universe, follow my heart, live with integrity, and am a channel of divine grace and creative power in the world.

Hell, at the very least, is being mentally separated from Reality — being caught up in fear, cynicism, distrust, selfishness, bitterness, illusion, falsity, hatred, or anything else that keeps me alienated from Love, from Christ. To be *in* hell is to be a cell in the body without knowing it, pursuing one's own self interest with no regard for the health and wellbeing of the larger body that it's part of, like a cancer cell. Hell is being cut off from my true Self, my true Nature. To be *in* heaven is to be aware of my identity as a cell in the divine body, and to allow the will and purpose of the Self of the Universe, God, to flow naturally and effortlessly through me.

Heaven and hell have thus transformed into states of being for me in *this* life. Death itself has taken on new meaning as well. I am less concerned with what

death is than in how I wish to *be* when the time draws near. I wish to be ready for death, accepting of death, even jubilant of death as the final letting go of all illusion and attachment. Prepared for death, I will surrender into God.

I know that the atoms and molecules of my body shall return to Earth to nourish and sustain others; I fervently hope that I shall have lived my life such that my actions and contributions will also. But what of my spirit, my soul? Here, a story tells it best.

During the process of my becoming a United Church of Christ minister, I presented and defended my ordination paper to a gathering of ministers and lay leaders in western Massachusetts. After my presentation, entitled "A Great Story Perspective on the UCC Statement of Faith," (which you can read on my website if you'd like) during the question and answer period, a well-respected minister stood up and said, "Michael, I'm quite impressed with your presentation, and with this evolutionary theology you've shared with us. However, the little boy in me wants to know: Where is Emory?" Emory Wallace, a well-known and widely beloved retired minister who had had been my mentor, had died suddenly at the age of 85, just a few weeks before this ordination hearing. This was my response:

"In order to answer that question I have to use both day language — the language of rational, everyday discourse — and night language — the language of dreams and symbols and myths. Both types of speech are vital and necessary, just as both states of consciousness are vital and necessary. As I'm sure you know; if we are deprived of the opportunity to dream for any length of time — as mammals, as primates, as humans — we die. But, of course, we fully understand and accept that day language and night language are very different. For example, if you were to ask me how my day went today and I were to say, 'It was great. After lunch I flew over to the Dairy Queen on the other side of town, turned into a cow, and started eating the grass along the sides of the parking lot,' and kept a straight face, you'd probably think something was very wrong with me and might suggest that perhaps a visit to the local psychiatrist might be in order. However, if you had asked me about a dream I recently had and I said the same thing, you might be curious as to the interpretation or meaning of my dream, but you wouldn't think I was losing my mind. Everyone knows that it's possible to fly or turn into another creature in the dream state.

"So in order to respond to your question, 'Where is Emory, now that he's dead?' I have to answer in two ways. First, in the language of everyday discourse, I would say, 'Emory's physical body will eventually be completely consumed by bacteria, leaving only his skeleton and teeth. His genes, contributions, and memory will continue to live on in his family and in the countless people that he touched in person and through his writings, in those they touch, and so on. And his life force or spirit — his soul — has returned to the Whole — the Great Mystery that I call 'God'.

"But, you see, if I stop there, if that's all I say, then I've told only half the story. I must go on and say something like: 'And I'm sure Emory is also seated at the right



hand of God the Father (or in the loving arms of God the Mother, if you prefer), surrounded by a host of heavenly angels.’ And that would also be true — true within the accepted logic and understanding of night language.”

**Student: Wow. What was their response?**

**Michael:** Well, they voted to ordain me, so I guess it couldn’t have been too bad!

Coming back to what we were talking about a few minutes ago, a question that really interests me is this: What are ways that we can think and speak about Infinite, Ultimate Reality, or God, that ring true to scripture’s witness, resonate with our own personal and community experience, and empower us to live life passionately while contributing in some way to what God is creating *today*. In other words, given what we understand scientifically about the nature of reality, what is the gospel, or good news, for *our* time? This is where, I believe, The Great Story shines!

My book *EarthSpirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity*, written twelve years ago, begins to plant a few seeds into this fertile ground. It was the first book to popularize the epic of evolution for Christians and to look appreciatively at the central tenets of New Testament faith from the perspective of 13 billion years of divine creativity. The question that drove me to write *EarthSpirit* was this: How can the core elements of my faith — sin, salvation, the kingdom of God, heaven and hell, Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life — be experienced in light of how the universe is actually understood today by the vast majority of scientists? (Rather than how the biblical writers understood it two or three millennia ago.) My aim was to interpret the essence of Christianity in ways that touch, move, and inspire twenty-first century people to follow Jesus and to walk in his steps — without them having to check their minds at the door.

**Student: That’s exactly what I’m looking for! But I’m worried that, although my Christian faith and science may be reconciled through what you call The Great Story, I worry that my faith may be somehow diminished. I don’t want that.**

**Michael:** Of course not. And good for you! One of the central messages of the Bible, as I read it, is that it’s impossible to have a truly joyful, peaceful, deeply fulfilling life without faith, or trust — in Love, in Life, in God.

Let me tell you a personal story, and see if this applies to you. By coming to embrace the epic of divine creativity as a “great” story for me personally, I have been blessed with — and with no real effort on my part, mind you — a more immediate and embodied personal relationship to Christ than ever before.

Here is why: Prior to looking through the lens of the epic of evolution told as the sacred story of God’s emergent love, generosity, and creativity, I was looking out at the world only through biblical lenses and using biblical language and metaphors. So I had a difficult time personally experiencing (that is, feeling; not just thinking

about) the incarnational love of God in Christ *today*. I could easily imagine the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago. That was no problem. But how to experience *with my senses* — that is, deeper than words, beyond beliefs — the *embodied* love of God today? I was clueless. The best I could do was to tarry and pray for “the second coming of Christ” (And believe me, I was certain he was coming back on the clouds, just as it says in the Bible.)

But since adopting a sacred, post-modern cosmology by looking through the lenses of The Great Story, I now relate to Reality, both in its seen and unseen aspects, as a real embodiment, a true incarnation, of God’s love. Is this making sense to you?

**Student: Yes, I think so. Go on.**

**Michael:** So when I talk to college students like yourself, and others, today, I prefer to use contemporary cosmological language to convey the core truths of my faith. That is, I like to speak of the universe as “God’s body.” God’s body. I didn’t invent this language. Widely respected theologian Sallie McFague wrote a book by that title. But, I tell you: this metaphor really works for me. The universe as God’s body! Why, that means that it is no longer a question of my having to beckon God to be present to me in prayer. If I just open my eyes, my heart, my senses, I can see and experience God in anything, in anyone, at any time.

And who is Jesus? Who is Jesus for me? Jesus is “the compassionate heart of Reality,” the heart of the cosmos. Jesus is the one through whom God’s redemptive love was revealed so clearly and poignantly in the gospels. Jesus is there for me whenever I stop and pay attention to my heart, and ask its wisdom, his wisdom, to guide me.

As for the Holy Spirit, ha! What is “the nested creativity” of the universe — the all-pervasive creativity in all matter and energy, at every scale, if not the Holy Spirit?

So there we have it: the universe — and every piece of the universe — as God’s body. Jesus as the true heart of Reality. The Holy Spirit as the creativity that runs through it all. There are surely many other legitimate interpretations of the mystery of the Three in One, but this is a Trinity I can experience and celebrate!

**Student: Tell me more about Jesus as the compassionate heart of Reality — the heart of the cosmos. And more about what this way of thinking personally means for you. What does it give you?**

**Michael:** Well, for one, I now have the most intimate, personal relationship with Jesus that I’ve ever had. Jesus now is not only my “Lord and Savior,” he’s also the proper name for my heart! And if you invite him to be so, he’d love to be your heart too. But *you* have to decide; that’s the New Testament message.

Let me explain: Twenty years ago I read Charles Sheldon’s classic little book, *In His Steps*. Ever since, I’ve known that asking myself in any given situation “What would Jesus do?” and “What is my heart leading me to do?” always gets me the same

answer. Now I know why! It is only through my heart that I can possibly answer the question, "What would Jesus do?" It is not a mind thing. So now I look for Jesus inwardly, and feel his direction through the leadings of my own heart.

I also know why all my life I've felt such an affinity for nature (as all children do) and why I feel so passionate about contributing to, and ensuring, a just, humane, beautiful, and sustainably life-giving world for future generations. If the universe is God's body (whether we recognize it or not), and Jesus is the compassionate heart of the cosmos, and the Holy Spirit is the pervasive, nested creativity of matter, how could I not feel such an affinity, and have such a passion?!

You see, this world is not some machine that we can exploit for our own, short-term benefit. It is a fully embodied expression of God's incarnational love and creativity! It's the most immediate expression of God's grace and generosity that we will ever know this side of death. Moreover, we don't have to try to "save the world." Invite people to put their faith, their trust, in God? You bet! Work to correct injustice? Absolutely! The world doesn't need to be saved. "The world" is maturing, — and we are part of the process — whether we think we are or not. The good news is that the bad news is actually good news in disguise. As my friend and mentor Sister Miriam MacGillis likes to say, "From the perspective of The Great Story, it's all right on schedule." Now if that's not something worth celebrating, what is?

Sorry. I got to preaching a little there. My creatheistic exuberance just took over.

**Student: Your what?**

**Michael:** Creatheism is a word I coined, though tend not to use when speaking to others unless I can take time to explain myself. Just as you might hear the word "atheism" in there, a non-theist might hear the word "creationism" and be just as wary. What I ask you to hear is "creativity" and "theistic." Let me explain:

Creatheism, for me, is way of thinking and talking about God and the universe that includes yet transcends all previous god-isms. Creatheism says that *all* the religious and non-religious viewpoints along the theist to atheist spectrum point to something true about the nature of things, but none captures the whole truth by itself. This means that theism, atheism, deism, pantheism, panentheism, monotheism, and polytheism — even though some are clearly oppositional — all have something to offer.

Do you find it surprising that I would say that?

**Student: Worse. I find it deeply disturbing. And that makes me sad, because I liked a lot of what you said up till now.**

**Michael:** Well, this point may not speak to you. And, if it doesn't, that's okay. But let me offer it, just in case, because I think I've been where you are now.

Let me begin with a little history. It is important to know that historically, atheism arose as a response to a limited, mechanistic understanding of theism. Because the dominant metaphor for understanding Reality over the last three centuries was a clock — that is, as a human-made lifeless machine — theists were forced to speak of God as sort of a Big Daddy in the Sky — a heavenly landlord who resided off the planet, even outside the universe. God, of course, would intervene in the world, as the Bible demonstrates. But one of the challenges theists faced was to explain why it seemed that God was so active a few thousand years ago, but less so today. Deists imagined God similarly — as a heavenly engineer who made this clockwork universe and set it running. The major difference was that deists generally believe that God does not intervene in the world.

Now, a notion of God as a kind of supreme landlord who presides over but is not physically intimate with this world is not at all my personal experience of God, and I suspect it is not yours either. Consider too that the path of science has now led us well beyond a clockwork universe image of reality. The universe is best understood as nested creativity, or as suffused with Spirit in each and every part, if you prefer.

And yet much traditional Christian language still draws us into the old image of God. So we know one thing, we experience one Reality, but our language holds us back. It doesn't help us.

Here's the surprise. I can actually be grateful to atheists! I can be grateful to atheists for poking holes in such an otherworldly theism — and for forcing me to think more deeply about my faith. Atheists were, after all, among the first to point out that what we call "the universe" is inherently creative. In other words, they compellingly made the case that creativity is pervasive throughout, and from the very beginning — not simply *at* the beginning. These are hugely important contributions in my mind, for these distinctions clear a path that allows my personal experience of God to reconfigure how I think and speak about God.

Polytheists — those who speak of many gods or many faces of the divine — have a grasp on an important facet of truth, too. Polytheists remind us, or at least they remind *me*, that, while it may be true that there is only one Ultimate Reality (which, of course, is the central insight of *monotheism*), it is also true that every life form and every collective of life-forms has its own creativity, its own spontaneity, its own intelligence. Each is a unique expression of the Infinite. Each is a face of God. And each reveals something precious about God's love, creativity, and generosity — if I but have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

**Student: I can see those insights as contributions. Though, for me, they don't seem at all at odds with my faith. Ideally, I shouldn't have to listen to an atheist to get that every part of the universe — God's body, as you call it — is creative. And yes, if the universe is God's body, then each part of it would, of course, show a different aspect of God to me. But I shouldn't have to listen to a polytheist in order to understand that either.**

**Michael:** That's exactly the point! You've got it!

**Student: So then where does your creatheism enter, and why yet another term to add to this confusing list?**

**Michael:** The burden of proof is definitely on me for suggesting a new term. And my advocacy on this point is pretty low key. I'm interested in promoting the understanding far more than any particular term. "Creatheism" is simply an easy handle for me to use in referring to an interrelated set of concepts. Six concepts are primary, and you should know that these are all grounded in a number of now widely accepted observations about the nature of the world and the universe.

First, as human beings we must use analogies and metaphors for understanding Ultimacy — there's simply no other option. In other words, we don't experience Reality *as it is*; we experience Reality *as we are*. We see through the lenses of our mental filters, including what we tell ourselves and tell each other about the nature of things. *All* of our words, theologies, theories, equations, and language about God, the universe, nature, or Ultimate Reality are, and will forever remain, mere symbols, metaphors, abstractions. Our words are the map, not the territory. They are the menu, not the meal. Got that?

**Student: That one's easy. Like you talking about the universe as the body of God, or Jesus as the compassionate heart of the cosmos — or, as I have heard so often, the lamb of God. There is no other way of communicating abstract concepts than by metaphors. I get that.**

**Michael:** Good. Now the second primary realization is this: Human beings (genus *Homo*) have existed for two and a half million years. We domesticated fire more than a million years ago. Yet we've only been speaking and thinking in words for a fraction of that time. (Some scientists believe that verbal, symbolic language emerged over hundreds of thousand of years or longer, but the majority view is that the shift from primarily non-verbal to primarily verbal modes of communication and thinking occurred some 50–100 thousand years ago.) In either case, the fact is that our ancestors experienced Reality (the world/the universe) as God-like or divine — that is, mysterious, awesome, benevolent, creative, wise, seemingly all-knowing, occasionally severe, seemingly all-powerful, nourishing, forgiving, etc. — long, long before they had any names, words, or concepts for God or divinity. Thus, every God concept — every symbol, analogy, or metaphor for Reality as a whole or any aspect of it — has its origin in a people's actual experience of the world around them, and within them. To easily understand how this is so, simply reflect on the fact, as my mentor Thomas Berry likes to point out, that if we lived on the moon, and never knew anything else, our language and metaphors for God would all reflect the barrenness of the lunar landscape.

**Student: That point seems to follow directly from your metaphor argument. So continue.**

**Michael:** Third, the universe is more than we think it is — and (here's the really humbling part) it is more than we can possibly think it is. As renowned astronomer

and physicist Steven Hawking, in his recent best selling book: *The Universe in a Nutshell*, readily admits, we know virtually nothing about 90% or more of the universe. This is because scientists have no idea what “dark matter” is, and dark matter comprises 90% of the universe. Scientists have no idea what dark matter is made of, where it came from, how it works, or anything else about it. All they know is that, whatever it is, dark matter makes the galaxies move differently than they should given our understanding of matter, energy, and gravity.

But beyond dark matter, there is another reason why we can be fairly certain that the universe as a whole will forever elude humanity’s collective mental grasp. The reason is this: Quite simply, there is no such *thing* as “the universe”! The cosmos is not a *thing*, separate from us, which we can objectively study. We are the cosmos, learning about itself! We are a subset of the Whole, allured by the Whole to contribute to the Whole. And a mere subset will never be able to fully grasp the nature and intelligence of the larger reality of which it’s a part.

**Student: No argument from me there! But I just had a thought: What if I were to read the entire New Testament while continually reminding myself that “we are a subset of the Whole being allured by the Whole to contribute to the Whole.” I wonder what new insights might be revealed to me?**

**Michael:** Fabulous! Do it! Then write a book on it. If you have any writing skill at all, I’m quite certain that it will become a best seller. How can I know this? Because this is exactly the kind of thinking that our times are calling for! But you need to realize that it will probably take a little practice. It’s easy to read the Bible literally, but reading it cosmologically? Well, that’s a new thing for most people. (If you’re serious about this, I strongly encourage you to read all the great stuff up on our website so that you have a solid understanding of this new cosmology.) But I promise you — I absolutely guarantee it — whenever you *do* read the Bible this way, the scriptures will come alive for you and you will see their deep wisdom in a real, this-world sense like never before!

**Student: Cool! I’ll do it.**

**Michael:** Now for the fourth point: Creation is creative, divinely so, all the way up and all the way down. Said another way, scientists have discovered that the universe is “nestedly creative” — atoms within cells within molecules within organisms within ecosystems within planets within galaxies, and so on. And each level embodies an intelligence and creativity that the other levels simply don’t have access to. Therefore, faith, or trust, just makes sense. And really, for the health of the whole system (all the nesting dolls together), it’s actually necessary.

**Student: You are speaking to a Christian, of course, so I have no argument there. But I can’t imagine that atheists would accept your point about trusting the whole.**



**Michael:** Some do have a difficult time with this. My next point, however, point number 5, reaches out to atheists, too. Here it is: What we name something makes a difference in how we understand, experience, and relate to it.

**Student: That point seems too obvious to be a problem for anybody.**

**Michael:** I'd like to think so. But listen. Let's now think about how we should name the largest whole of all — the "nesting doll" that embraces all the others — the Whole that is so large and so ancient and so complex that science alone can not fully grasp what it is about. Shall we call this largest whole "the universe"? That's one possibility, of course. Yet we could also call the largest context — that which includes yet transcends everything else — "God". And we could know that the creativity present in each and every atom of God's body at all scales is the Holy Spirit. And we could also know that Jesus is the human incarnation of God's love, still very much present and accessible in our hearts, and as the heart of the cosmos itself.

**Student: Ah, I see how you are bringing this all together!**

**Michael:** Now to the sixth and final point: When the primary metaphor for understanding Reality was a clock, a human-made machine (lifeless, mechanical, no purpose, no direction, no soul, no spirit, no consciousness) the only place other than incarnate in Jesus that God could be pictured was outside the universe. Even though traditional, orthodox theology has said all along that God is both transcendent *and* immanent, as long as we thought that the universe was like a machine, we could only *picture* God as transcendent. But now that we've come to understand that "the universe" is just a convenient, two word, non-personalized way of talking about that intelligent and creative Reality in which we all live and move and have our being, and which is alluring us to commit ourselves in service to the future, it's quite easy to imagine God's immanence, wouldn't you say?

**Student: Getting easier all the time!**

**Michael:** Said another way: Human beings are like conscious cells in the body of a creative planet, which is part of a creative universe, which will *always* be more awesome and complex than we can ever possibly imagine! So in addition to having transcendent metaphors for God, we now have immanent images for God — such as "the universe as God's body," or "God" as the proper name for Infinite Reality — which includes the material world.

God may be more than whatever "the universe" is, but God is certainly not *less* than the universe! If God is Infinite, then there's no place that God stops and something else begins. So if I only entertain transcendent, otherworldly metaphors of the divine, and fail to also recognize, appreciate, and theologize about God's embodiment, God's self-expression, God's self-revelation, and God's manifestation *within* Nature, then I've not yet integrated the revelation that we are part and parcel of a nestedly creative cosmos.

In light of *that* revelation — and it *is* a divine revelation, make no mistake about it — those who imagine God only outside the universe, and not also in the universe, have a fairly serious theological problem on their hands. The problem is this: what to call and how to relate to a living, intelligent cosmos? They have effectively become polytheists — postulating two Gods. It is perfectly legitimate to imagine God outside the cosmos. But we must also find a way of relating to a genuinely awesome, wise, loving, creative, generous, and at times terrifying Kosmos (the way the ancient Greeks referred to the fullness of Reality — with a proper name), or suffer the consequences of not doing so.

**Student: What consequences?**

**Michael:** Look around you! Environmental degradation, species extinction, habitat destruction, a growing gap between the rich and the poor. Need I continue? As we as an interconnected global society begin to recognize the world, including ourselves, as part of God's body, which we will, and we begin to once again value the sacredness of the natural world, we will relate to it and to each other very differently than we presently do. This is in fact our destiny. It's the Great Work of our time. And of this I am confident: In less than 100 years, the idea of viewing planet Earth and other species as commodities, *things* that can and should be exploited for short-term human benefit, will be seen as laughable, or criminal. Our present economic system is designed such that it is both possible and profitable for a subset of the whole to benefit at the expense of the whole. Future generations will look back on our time and this fact and just shake their heads. Fortunately, things are already beginning to change in a major way, as you'll see if you spend any time at all exploring the "Favorite Links and Resources" page on our website.

On a personal level, perhaps the most significant negative consequence of failing to relate to the fact of a divine cosmos, both psychologically and spiritually, is the feeling of alienation from God and/or reduced opportunities for intimacy with God.

Related to this, for myself, I'd have to say that the greatest benefit I've received from this way of seeing is in my prayer life. Prayer for me is no longer about trying to get a spiritual presence from outside the universe to intervene in what's going on down here. Rather it's more like I'm a cell in the body, who, through prayer, is communicating with the body as a whole — the Wisdom of the Ages — often in a language older than words. For me this is a far more intimate and incarnational way of thinking about, and experiencing, prayer. And it's made the Apostle Paul's admonishment to "pray without ceasing" more understandable and doable.

**Student: Prayer I understand, and I look forward to approaching it anew — thinking of it as a cell in the body communicating with the body as a whole. I've got to go in a few minutes but I have one last question.**

**Michael:** Go for it.

**Student: I thought of this early on when you were explaining how The Great Story enriches your Christianity. I was wondering if the reverse was true, too.**

**Michael:** Yes, it is.

**Student: So my question then is: *How* has the Bible, or your Christian faith, enriched your understanding or experience of the universe? Can you give me some examples?**

**Michael:** Great question!

I'm grateful to God, beyond words, for the opportunity over many years of having had truly positive religious experiences in many different Christian contexts, and even a few non-Christian ones. The range is rather astonishing to me when I look back over my life.

I've felt God's presence in "high church" Roman Catholic and Episcopal masses, as well as in Baptist tent meetings and Pentecostal "shoutin 'n shakin" revival services. I've sat quietly in Quaker Meetings and sang Methodist hymns at the top of my lungs. I've been blessed by the positive, practical Christianity celebrated in Unity churches, and by the wisdom of 70- to 90-year old Congregational and Baptist women in a Bible study group. With children in my arms, I've danced joyfully to songs of praise and worship during Charismatic worship services, and I've stood awestruck, speechless, inside the womb of majestic Cathedrals. I've prayed the rosary with heart and had a mystical experience kneeling before a statue of the Blessed Virgin.

I've heard God speak to me through the Bible so clearly, so directly, and so profoundly, that I immediately burst into tears and have never been the same since. And I've had similar experiences participating in a Native American Sweat Lodge ceremony and on a silent retreat facilitated by world-renowned Buddhist peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. I've broken bread with Anabaptist Mennonites who live the message of New Testament community like I've never seen anyone live before, or since. And I've had the honor and privilege of pastoring three mainline Protestant churches, seeking to witness their faith in embodied ways in their respective communities.

Given this wealth and diversity of experience, I rarely get caught anymore thinking that there is only one right, true version of Christianity, or any other religion for that matter. It has also helped me realize that it's the *experience* of faith, or trust, that really matters, not my beliefs about God or anything else. It's the *experience* of ongoing forgiveness and reconciliation that determines the quality of my life, not how often I go to church or read the Bible. My eternal destiny is impacted far more by the integrity with which I live and relate to others, and by the love and generosity I exhibit in the real world, than it is by whether or not I've been baptized or whether I've been "saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost."

Having said this, I must quickly add, however, that our beliefs *do* make a difference, a real difference, as does the frequency and depth of relationship with a supportive community and the frequency of inspirational sustenance. But coming back to your question: How has my walk with Christ, and my Christian experience, enriched my understanding and experience of the cosmos? In a word, profoundly!

Because I've been blessed in so many ways, and in such a diversity of Christian and non-Christian settings, and because I've tasted God's love, presence, and power in each, as well as countless times outdoors in "nature", I now pretty much expect to see God all day when I wake up in the morning. Thanks to the experiences I've had, both inside and outside houses of worship, I can usually remember without too much difficulty that my Lord is present in every creature — human and non-human — especially in the hearts of those who suffer. When I look into the eyes of another person, or into the face of another animal, or at a majestic tree or mountain, I often remind myself that I am seeing a face of The Holy One: a unique expression of divine grace and beauty. And I am humbled by this awareness.

A second way that my Christian experience enriches my understanding of the universe is that, because of my faith, I have had no trouble at all accepting that the cosmos is going somewhere — that there's a direction to evolution. It's been easy for me to embrace the idea that the universe (God's body) is becoming more complex, more aware, and more intimate with itself over time, and that we humans are an important part of that process.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has also helped me nurture a habit of trusting that "the universe is conspiring on my behalf." And I really do believe this. In fact, it's probably the single most useful and empowering belief that I have. Notice that I didn't say "true"; I said "useful and empowering." In a nestedly creative cosmos, I really don't think it's possible to know whether Reality is conspiring on my behalf or not. But if I can't know for certain that it *is*, then I also can't know for certain that it's not. So by choosing to believe and act as though it *is*, Wow, do I love my life!

**Student: I like what you say about trusting Reality. Can you give me an example of how this works.**

**Michael:** Well, when something painful, or "negative," or "bad" happens to me, thanks to this belief I virtually always stop and ask myself, "Okay, how might this be the universe conspiring on my behalf? What's the gift and the blessing here?" As soon as I pose these questions, I naturally start filtering for how this painful or difficult experience might actually *be* a contribution to my life, a blessing from God. And guess what? Even without an answer coming to mind, if I've really, seriously entertained the question, within a minute or two my feelings shift, often dramatically. I let go of wishing that it didn't happen. My resentment, frustration, anger, (or whatever), almost immediately evaporates. I start getting curious. Sometimes I'll even laugh at myself. And very quickly, more than 90% of the time within a matter of minutes, I'm back to trust and appreciation. It's become a very empowering habit.

This is going to sound arrogant, but I don't mean it that way at all. Integrating a Christ-like faith and The Great Story has made me less judgmental, more forgiving, and more joyful and full of energy than almost anyone else I know — and I'm quite certain that virtually all my friends and family, those who know me best, would say the same thing about me. It's not anything I've done, of course. I can't take credit for being this way. It's purely God's grace, I know. But I also know that how I look at the world, while professing Jesus as my heart, definitely helps makes it possible.

Related to this, another way that my walk with the Lord enriches my view of evolution, and I think one of the reasons why I was so immediately turned on by The Great Story in the first place, is that, thanks to the biblical witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the realization of the spiritual truth of this story in my own heart and experience, I find it pretty natural to look for the gift and the blessing in our cultural and global problems and crises as well.

When I look at the history of 13 billion years of divine creativity as a sacred story, I can see clearly how God seems to delight in taking bad news and turning it into new growth and new possibilities. There is no example in evolutionary history that I am aware of in which chaos, violence, destruction, and even mass extinction — all a natural part of life — were not followed by a burst of creativity and an explosion of new opportunities. From God's perspective, from the perspective of the Whole (that Reality which embraces and includes, yet transcends, everything else — visible and invisible), bad news is almost always good news in disguise. On the other side of the cross is resurrection power, freedom, and new life in Christ. This insight, central to the Great News of The Great Story, will be increasingly appreciated by millions of people around the world, Christian and non-Christian alike, as the revelation that we are part of an intelligent, creative cosmos becomes widely known and accepted, not merely as a religious insight, but as the REAL truth — the gospel truth!

The future is surely in God's hands. But, praise God, we get to play a vital role in its emergence! We get to be the fingers and muscles of God's hands, if only we have the humility to trust what God is doing and the courage see things anew. And if we are willing to follow our hearts (where the risen Christ literally dwells) no matter what the cost or circumstances. The fact of the matter is this: to the degree that each one of us pursues our spiritual calling — that is, where our own great joy and the world's great need intersect — then, by grace, we will participate (and glory!) in "the coming kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven."

May it be so for you!

God bless.

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